

**Good Yom Tov Everyone.** On Shavuos we read the inspiring story of Rus (Ruth) the convert to Judaism. Ruth was a convert to Judaism, willingly entering a covenant with Hashem through the acceptance of His Torah. On Shavuos, the Jewish people en masse entered this covenant with Hashem by willingly accepting His Torah. The connection between Shavuos and conversion is not just homiletic; the conversion steps taken by Ruth, as well as by prospective converts until this very day, are akin, and derived from, the steps the Jewish people took at Sinai in the process of receiving the Torah. The following is a modern day "Ruth" story, as told by Michèle Sankar.

"On any journey, it is just as important to know where we have come from as it is knowing where we are going. So let me tell you a bit about my beginnings. My name is Michèle Sankar, and I was born into a religious family... a religious Roman Catholic family. My mother is of Irish-Canadian background, and was raised with a love of the church, Catholic education, and a strong sense of morality.

My father was born in Hungary, and although he left with his family when he was a young teen during the revolution of 1956, he, too, attended Catholic schools all his life. The usual Catholic milestones filled my childhood – baptism as an infant in a Hungarian church in Toronto, First Communion, Saturday morning religion classes, weekly Mass, and so on. Catholicism was a source of pride for me, and I was a devoted and happy Roman Catholic!

When I was two, my family moved to a small village about an hour-and-a-half from Toronto. At that time, the population was 1,200 people – with at least 5 different churches in the village. Not a Catholic one, mind you. You see, the community was very Protestant, so our little, old Catholic church was out on the country side roads, and that's where I went to church, along with a few Italian, Polish, Dutch and Irish families. Despite being in the minority – and the fact that, as Catholics, we were occasionally subjected to some negative comments – I was incredibly proud of my Catholicism.

As a nine-year-old, I marched confidently into my classroom with a cross of ashes on my forehead after having been to pre-Easter services at church that morning. I loved it all! I even "knew" that I would only marry a Catholic, and would bemoan the fact that there were only two or three boys in my class who would be eligible husbands. As I grew up in a very Christian community, I knew virtually nothing about Jews.

One part of our Sunday church service referred to "our brothers and sisters, the Jews." I asked my Irish mother about Jews at one time, and she smiled and told me that the Jews were very special people with a special connection to G-d. That stayed with me, and at the age of eight, a Jewish seed was planted. Not once did I hear anything anti-Semitic from my parents, or from any of the churches or Catholic institutions I attended. So the Jewish spark was kindled, but I was Catholic... I was going to marry a Catholic. I had even picked out good Catholic names like Anthony and Maria for my future children.

But somehow, something was pulling me towards Judaism. I have always been an avid reader so I started looking for Jewish-themed books. While our little library wasn't great, it did have some children's books and novels with connections to the Holocaust. I read them all. My parents became friends with a Jewish couple that lived out in the country with their two children. This was my first time to meet "real" Jews! We visited them once when the lady's older father was also visiting. He reached for something, which caused his shirtsleeve to pull up slightly. And there on his forearm, I saw them. Numbers written in bluish-green ink on his arm. It took a moment for me to realize what they were. This was my first real connection with the Holocaust – a man who looked like a regular grandfather, but had clearly lived through a horrific period.

When I was about nine or ten years old, our family was invited to a Passover seder by that same Jewish couple. There were no Jews for 60 miles, so they decided that the next best thing would be to invite their nice Catholic friends. Ours was a family who would understand and appreciate a seder! For many of you, each time you sit at the seder, you're reminded of previous years. You know what the bitter herbs and matzah taste like... you are familiar with the sights, the smells, the story, the songs.

And yet, there was little Catholic Michèle sitting for the first time at a seder table, and it was like déjà-vu for me. I knew and "remembered" those tastes – the crunchy, the bitter, the salty. How could something be so surreal and yet so natural and familiar? I was home. So my Catholic plan for life took a little twist. Catholicism was still good, but I needed Jewish stuff. It was part of me now, and I couldn't dismiss it. Every time I watched TV or a movie, I scanned all the names in the credits, trying to identify which ones were Jewish.

I expanded my reading from Holocaust books to Jewish-kid-growing-up-in-Brooklyn books, including Chaim Potok's novels such as *The Chosen*. I learned that keeping kosher meant more than not eating pork. When I was eleven, I had the wonderful opportunity to fly to Hungary for the summer, and spent two months in a town with my grandfather's sister. She was a devout Catholic and we went to church every day. Nusi had never married and had no children or grandchildren of her own, but she loved and indulged me the way a grandmother would. Money was scarce in Communist Hungary at the time, but she gave me a gift of a pad of paper and some colored pencil crayons. I can still remember her shock when she looked through my art pad, expecting to see pictures of kittens and flowers, and found instead a series of concentration camp scenes. The figures I drew were all faceless, but in Hungary I felt compelled to create these pieces nonetheless.

We took trips to various cities, yet I just wanted to pass synagogues, to see them from the outside. It was around this time that I started having Holocaust nightmares where I frequently awoke in a cold sweat, having dreamed of running through alleys and forests, hiding when I could. Naturally, I attributed this to reading so many books about this tragic period in history. I was about twelve, and my parents knew that I was strong in my faith and they were happy with my

reading and learning. My dad then told me about another family whose wife was Jewish.

Wow! I knew of two Jews near our community! Imagine my delight when The Jewish Wife lent me a book called The Jewish Catalogue, a comprehensive guide to all things Jewish. Very happily, I began reading about Shabbat, the holidays, koshering meat, and other concepts that were new to me. As I was nearing the end of grade 8, it was time to face a new chapter in my life. Until this time, I had been in public school, the only option in our town. My parents had both attended Catholic boarding schools, and so this option was presented to me. I was thrilled! There was also a part of me that was interested in becoming a nun, although that meant not marrying my yet-to-be-discovered Catholic husband or having my already-named Catholic children.

And so I spent my four years of high school in a convent boarding school in London, Ontario. They were wonderful years. I went to Catholic Mass twice a week and was part of the religious committee, studying, singing and taking an active role in the community. And yet, I continued to entertain Jewish thoughts. In every textbook, I would scan the index for Jews, Judaism, or Israel, and try to soak up what I could. The only troubling aspect was the occasional nightmare of running through old alleyways, between stone buildings, down secret passageways, until I got to a forest where I kept running. Looking back now, perhaps I wasn't running away, but beginning to run towards something...

At 17, I started my studies at the University of Toronto, which is where I started moving more purposefully toward Judaism. For the first time, I met Jews my age. My dreams of meeting a nice Catholic boy were starting to be replaced by dreams of meeting a nice Jewish boy. I went to church less often. I registered for a Biblical Hebrew course at the university, where we learned the Hebrew alphabet and began reading Genesis in Hebrew.

Finally, in my third year, I realized I needed to make a decision. I had no anger toward the church, and it hadn't disappointed me; my experiences had all been positive. But as great as it was, I felt G-d was tugging me toward Judaism. There had been signs and clues in my growing years, and I needed to listen. It was time to make my first call. I telephoned a synagogue in Toronto, and asked to speak to the rabbi. This was the first time I spoke these words aloud: "I want to be a Jew." Silence on the other end of the phone. Then the rabbi's voice: "Are you engaged to a Jew?" "No." "Dating a Jew?" "No." "Well, that's usually why people want to convert." "But I want to convert because I want to be a Jew." He asked about my age and background, and then started to dissuade me. It's really too hard... There's a lot involved..... Being Catholic is good too, and so on. But I persisted. To discourage me further, he listed many books that I should buy. I bought them, I read them, I called him back. The rabbi agreed to meet and learn with me. It was clear that I had to tell my family. It was one of the most awkward and difficult conversations I have ever had. Oh, there was no screaming or crying... nothing like that. But how do you explain to your parents that you no longer believe in the divinity of the one they think is divine? How do you tell them that you can't eat food the way they prepare it? How do you let them know that December 25 and Easter are meaningless holidays to you, ones which you will no longer be celebrating? And how do you convey to them that this Jewish religion, with its rules and stringencies, is the faith you love and feel so much a part of? My mother did what any Irish Catholic mother would do in this situation. She went to her parish priest. While she was pouring out this story, he said to her, "Don't worry about Michèle. So many young people drop away altogether from religion. Your daughter went on a faith journey that brought her to Judaism. She still believes in G-d, and He takes care of the Jews. You don't need to worry about Michèle." Imagine that, coming from a priest. And I have to credit my mother, the most religious Catholic I know, for also being the most understanding and supportive.

Well, word got out. And do you know what was interesting? My non-practicing family and friends, the ones who didn't do much church-going, were generally the most judgmental and critical of my decision. My own father, whom I dearly love, could not understand how someone would choose to join such a "restrictive religion." His mother, my Hungarian grandmother, was very upset. She was grateful that her husband did not live to see this day. I couldn't understand why it bothered her – or my dad – so much, when neither of them had been heavy church-goers anyway.

During this time, I met in university – a nice Jewish boy, David – and he joined the learning train with me. I gave up pork, and did not eat dairy and meat together. But shellfish stayed on my menu. One evening, my mother made delicately breaded scallops – very unkosher. After sitting down to dinner, I put a scallop in my mouth and began to chew. Ugh! Dreadfully bitter. I immediately spat it out, thinking it was a bad scallop. I tried another... same story. Could it have been the oil that was rancid? My mum and step-dad said that theirs were fine. I insisted on trying half of one from my mother's plate. Her half was delicious, she said, yet mine was acrid. At this point, my lips and tongue were starting to feel numb, as if there were a thick coating of Vaseline jelly inside my mouth. That, of course, is one sign of a serious food allergy. For years I could eat the stuff, and now that I had committed to Judaism, G-d gave me a way to make sure I would never touch shellfish again. Eventually, I bought my own little meat pan and a dairy pot, plus simple plates and cutlery to use in my parents' home. By this time, David and I were enrolled in weekly conversion classes which were to last almost 18 months. Soon I was buying kosher meat for myself, and I quickly came to love the island in time that is Shabbat. Was it difficult? In some ways, yes. But by moving along at a reasonable pace, I was able to make each observance my own, and I saw how it made my life increasingly better.

A few months before the end of the conversion course, David asked me to marry him. I was going to be a bride! Eventually the day for me to go before the Beth Din – to convert – arrived. I answered the rabbi's questions, and finally went for my immersion in the mikvah waters. I tell you, the experience was unsurpassable in its beauty and meaning. The Hebrew date was the 5th of Iyar, and the parshah that week was Tazria/Metzora, which deals with the laws of mikvah. How appropriate! Continued on Shabbos... **Good Yom Tov Everyone.**