My Spiritual Journey

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I saw an old friend the other day whom I hadn't seen in about a year. "You look happy," she said with a hint of surprise in her voice. Through her eyes, I saw the new, more comfortable-in-my-skin self. The old me was tired and anxious. In part, my new relaxed state is due to achieving a milestone in my parenting—my kids are starting to gain just the barest hint of independence. They can fill their own water glasses at the bathroom sink and play out in the back yard with minimal supervision. But the bigger difference in my demeanor is no doubt due to the tremendous weight I crawled out from under this past summer when I finally came up with enough cash to finish paying off the Bet Din for my conversion to Orthodox Judaism. My conversion certificate is, after many long years, sitting comfortably in my filing cabinet at home.

Whether a construct of my own mind, a legitimate social fear, or a bit of both, I long thought that if I dared to deviate from the yeshivish perspective under which I became Orthodox, my conversion would be revoked. My children, all bearing very Jewish names, would be declared no longer Jewish and I would be cast out of my community. It was an awful thought and enough to keep me in long skirts and sleeves with my collarbone and head covered even though, in my heart, I believed that the concept of *tseniut* encompassed more of the complete person and really had little to do with a dress code.

I didn’t consciously suffer all that time. For the first few years after I decided to become *frum* /religiously observant, I wholeheartedly believed that the yeshivish way was the most authentic way. After all, when I questioned back then why the Modern Orthodox women I saw in the town where I converted generally wore trousers and didn't wear hats except on Shabbat, I was told that Modern Orthodox people were not as growth-oriented as the yeshivish community. When I asked whom to trust when it came to rabbinic decisions, the answer given was to examine who knew more Torah (the implication being that the yeshivish rabbis knew more).

I knew from a young age that I wanted to be Jewish. When I was 13 years old, I used to spend my lunch hours sitting on the floor of the school library just pulling books off the shelf— often because I liked their covers. One such glossy volume was Rabbi Malka Drucker’s *Shabbat*, part of her *Jewish Holidays* series. The idea of Shabbat captivated me. My mainstream Presbyterian upbringing was mostly empty of ritual, and Shabbat was exotic. When my parents left the house one Friday night, I poured red cranberry juice (the closest I could get to grape) into a clear glass and recited the Kiddush blessing in English as it was written in the book. It felt *holy* even sitting on the worn countertop in our Northern Michigan kitchen. In time, I secretly purchased the only Star of David necklace on sale at our

local JC Penney department store, and I wore it tucked into my shirt. I knew I had to become Jewish.
When I went to university, I made a last-ditch attempt to reconcile with Christianity. I tried different churches from the evangelical to the staid and traditional. Eventually, I found myself attending Kabbalat Shabbat services at the campus Hillel. The beautiful songs and the way the students took turns each week giving a *devar Torah* really impressed me. They were so mature and thoughtful and they possessed a knowledge about themselves, their religion, and the world that I envied. I felt that it was time to summon the courage to speak to a rabbi about conversion.
It took me another few years before I met with a rabbi willing and able to take me on as a conversion candidate, in the Conservative movement. One of the first questions Rabbi Dobrusin asked me was "What is your favorite Jewish holiday?" Easy answer. Shabbat. In the middle of studying for my Conservative conversion, I started dating a nice Jewish boy and he took me to a local *kiruv* organization's campus house for Shabbat dinner. I can still remember where I sat at the table that first time. *Shalom Aleikhem*...*Eishet Hayil*...the *zemirot* and *devar Torah*...the dark wood and deep purple and blue majestic hues in which the restored house was decorated added to the warmth and class of the experience. This was what I wanted. This Shabbat. These books lining the walls. This joyful time-out-of-time rest and enjoyment and relaxation. I became a regular there and it wasn't long before I was invited for Shabbat to a home in the nearby Orthodox enclave. The openness of the families I met and the simplicity and beauty I perceived in their lifestyle were only enhanced by the strong feeling of community. I felt at first like I belonged in this yeshivish Orthodox Jewish world.
Before I finished my Conservative conversion, I was already thinking about an Orthodox conversion. Two Batei Din were within reasonable driving distance. One was staffed by more Modern Orthodox rabbis and the other was black-hat. I chose the black-hat Bet Din because I feared that my conversion might not be accepted by absolutely everyone if I were to convert with the Modern Orthodox rabbis. By now, however, some of the luster had come off the closed, yeshivish world for me. Women not singing really bothered me. I found the snoods and *sheitels* weird and dowdy. The *shiurim* I attended were interesting but something niggled at my mind about the content. I know now that suspending independent, rational thought was what bothered me most. Even so, I worked hard to squish my doubts into a little box and shut the lid tight—and I filled out the paperwork to begin the Orthodox conversion process. A few times, my doubts popped out but I firmly pushed them back and told them that I would address them after-the-fact, thank you very much. I wanted my future children to be Jewish without question, and this seemed to be the best way to ensure that outcome.
When I finally went to the *mikvah* for Orthodox conversion nearly three years later, I had moved into the Orthodox community and was immersed in yeshivish culture. I had a social group of dear, down-to-earth friends and I adapted myself to my new way life, believing that I had found Truth in yeshivish Orthodoxy. I learned the *Ani Ma'amin* by heart and recited it as I stood wrapped in a sheet in the *mikvah* on my conversion day. The experience was surreal. The sheet would not behave as the rabbis told me it would—"Just lean forward! The sheet will float to the top!"—and I made several attempts at nearly drowning myself before the *mikvah* lady told them she would witness my final dunk herself without the sheet. When it was over, I felt pure and very much like I had a new *neshama*.
I threw myself into *frum* life. The dress code continued to bother me, but Shabbat and kashruth were mostly a pleasure. Many times I snuck out of my house on wear-your-jeans-to-work Friday in my favorite Levis, and I brazenly refused to put up and take down my storm windows in a skirt for fear of falling. My old rebellions and questions were still there hidden away under all the new ideas.
In time, I began to date and was introduced to my future husband via a *frum shidduchim* website. We married, and I moved across the country to a city with only a small handful of *frum* Jews. I wore my *sheitel* on Shabbat and played with hats and scarves during the week. Maintaining the dress code was a way for me to keep ties with my former community, many of whom wondered if I was really still *frum*. I put my jeans away for good.
The birth of my first son shook my world in many ways. Everything I did and had done for the past several years was focused on being *frum*. I displayed all the right books in my living room. I wore the right clothes. I tried to read the right books and get inspired at various online learning websites. But when my beautiful blond boy showed up, suddenly the old me, the me I had always really been, was

right there. I tried to learn and sing Jewish lullabies to him but would eventually give up and find comfort in my own Irish lullaby. I felt guilty. We bought him Jewish toys and books, but more and more, my child brought out in me instinctual behaviors I learned in my own childhood. The super-*frum* -24-hours-a-day me just faded away. I sat with those feelings for a while, keeping the mitzvoth but without the *ba'alat teshuvah* fervor. I got even more distracted by the birth of my second son, a redhead this time who looks like my father. I was beginning to try to reconcile my *frumkeit* with who I really was at heart when I got pregnant again.

My daughter, my third child, was born on a rainy November night. I had known in advance that she would be a girl and I was scared at what parenting a girl meant. She was a little pink mouse who was content as could be, and because she was a winter baby, I had many nights where we snuggled together on the couch as she nursed and grew. I watched the first season of *Glee* as she slept and found myself drawn increasingly to strong women and their stories. My job was to create the best world for this little female being whose velvet head I was kissing, and I needed to explore for myself what our options could be.

I realized that I never had the same fear about my boys and their prospects in the world. It's still a man's world in many ways, certainly in Orthodox Judaism, and I hadn't yet taken the time to reconcile how growing up with yeshivish values would impact all of my children. Until my daughter was born, I only envisioned sweet boys in *tzitzith* and white Shabbat shirts and girls in fancy Shabbat dresses sweetly saying *divrei Torah* at the Shabbat table. The implications of the dress codes and how I personally felt hindered by my skirts and headgear began to merge as my girly and I got to know each other and I pondered her future with as few limitations as possible.

It was around this time that I began to take a second look at the *Conversations* journals, which had been arriving at the house periodically for almost a year. We had been put on the mailing list by an acquaintance we met when we tried to convince the regional yeshivish *kiruv* kollel not to send another full-time rabbi to our city. Two Orthodox *shuls* in our town was one too many for the 10 or so *frum* and becoming-*frum* families. We had staked our claim with the Chabad *shul* even though we don't affiliate as Lubavitch because my husband became religious via the Chabad *shaliah* here, and the yeshivish *shul* was simply too far to walk to. This turf war started me looking critically at yeshivish Judaism, and I increasingly found a darker side of politics and cover-up.

I had honestly been afraid to read the articles in *Conversations* lest they contain opinions that weren't given approbation by the yeshivish rabbis. Instead, I found that they were not only interesting and challenging, but many of the articles were full of good sense and rational thought. Partially through reading *Conversations*, I regained my ability to question—to hold each idea up to the light and examine it on all sides. The world looks different when you take your head out of the sand. And, as lovely as it is to be immersed in Torah from a yeshivish perspective, I realized that those ideas would not hold water when it came to my children's education.

I began an email correspondence with the wife of a Modern Orthodox rabbi whom I had known many years before. She helped me figure out exactly what the halakhot of *tseniut* were and how they applied today. Perhaps it seems strange that a dress code would weigh so heavily on my mind, but I honestly felt encumbered. I was wearing a costume that prevented me from being and expressing who I really am in the world. Although there are only a handful of Jews in my city who identify as Orthodox, the Jewish community as a whole is much larger, and I actually found that my dress code was saying things about me to the broader community that just were not true. To those kind-hearted women and men who do many, many mitzvoth but not those which the Orthodox world holds up as *de rigeur*, I wanted to tear off my hat and say "See! I'm one of you, too!" The skirts and hats were hampering me physically, mentally, and they maintained a barrier between me and my own community.

I also embraced JOFA and its mission and continue to give thanks for its online articles and resources. I learned that there is halakhic basis for Modern Orthodox praxis, in spite of what I had been told years ago and I discovered that Modern Orthodoxy is really where I feel free to question and pursue intellectual honesty even if that takes me outside the bounds of traditional, rabbi-approved sources.

Shortly after I received my conversion certificate in the mail, I dug out my old pairs of jeans and wore them around the yard. Then I wore them to the grocery store. Now I wear them daily and almost

everywhere. I haven't yet run into anyone who would raise an eyebrow at the switch, but I know that day will come. I feel enough like my true self and I feel grounded enough in my Judaism that I'm not afraid anymore.

A close friend who happens to be more yeshivish and who has known me throughout my move into Modern Orthodoxy said to me the other day as we were discussing the Modern Orthodox view of halakha, "Do you really want to walk that close to the line?" But I know that there are 70 faces of the Torah and that an evolving, intellectually vibrant, honest, and compassionate Orthodoxy is where I'm going to thrive—and where I'm best positioned to pass on the beauty of Judaism to my children.