View PDF



Joelle Keene teaches music and journalism at Shalhevet High School in Los Angeles, where she advises the school's national award-winning newspaper and website, The Boiling Point and shalhevetboilingpoint.com. She previously worked for the Tacoma News-Tribune, Seattle Times, and Los Angeles Herald-Examiner, where she won awards for education coverage and investigative reporting, and served as Associate Editor of OLAM Magazine. She and her husband have three children, all in their 20s; her former students populate many college newsrooms and some of the top Jewish a capella groups in the United States. This article appears in issue 16 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

When I was in high school, a friend and I decided we needed to know whether God existed. It was a big public high school on Long Island, full of Catholics and Protestants who went to church and enough Jews to support a kosher bakery just around the corner from the football field. Everyone got along pretty well. But apart from bar mitzvahs, first communions, and the Civil Rights Movement—which galvanized much of the town’s clergy—daily life didn’t seem to have much to do with religion. God was mostly for holidays.

Yet I myself sensed God’s presence much more often, from an early age. For whatever reason, I always felt there was more going on than met the eye, that there was a Being up there Who cared about me and cared about right and wrong, and had set a right and a wrong in this world. It wasn’t a popular topic as the Vietnam War raged and college dorms started going co-ed and offering birth control pills. But for a few of us, it was pressing, and endured.

My friend was Presbyterian, and we met in choir at school, where I had some of the most intense and moving experiences of my life singing texts such as “O Magnum Mysterium” and “Surely He Hath Borne Our Griefs.” What was I to make of this? My family didn’t keep kosher, but I went to Hebrew school three times a week. I didn’t believe what I was singing, but I believed what I was feeling. So did my Christian friend. Our discussions were heartfelt and searching. We were

hoping God existed, because without God the world seemed random and notions of good and evil too subjective. And if God did exist, it would matter a lot how we behaved—and we'd have to find a path.

In retrospect it's obvious that we both really did believe, though I don't think either of us thought there was only one correct path to follow. We knew we weren't the first to ask these questions, and we didn't expect to have to invent religion for ourselves. But we thought it mattered a lot to God what we would do. For me, it was going to mean looking at the best evidence there was of what God had said, what had been revealed to humankind in words—I needed a source. Sooner or later, that would mean text.

And so I set about searching, and though the only path to God is one that takes a lifetime and renews itself every day, I do feel that I found what God wanted of me in Modern Orthodoxy. I don't think I could have landed anywhere else, and I'm always surprised to learn what a small—and to hear some tell it, fragile—outcropping of world Jewry it is. I don't think my experience of God or life is unusual, or the demands of Modern Orthodoxy philosophically difficult or severe (financially might be another matter), at least not for anyone who believes in God as a Being, Creator, or Consciousness outside of ourselves. Perhaps what's unique about my journey is just that I kept running into people who could explain things, and as diverse as these people were, all of them believed, and all of them were careful with language—words being so powerful, of course, that God used them to create the world. One by one, these teachers and what I learned from them prepared my steps: Baruch Ata … haMeichin m'tsadei gaver. The first time I said that blessing after we moved into Los Angeles' Pico-Robertson neighborhood, I knew that I was home.

So my journey began at the intersection of words and music, cobbled with contradictions and smoothed by these teachers, who seemed to come along at just the right moment. An avid piano student from the age of 7, I first signed up for choir at age 12, just when Hebrew School was ending and Junior Congregation was now for younger kids. I fell completely in love: music plus poetry, each making the other more compelling, sending the other to soar! The next years overflowed with madrigals and motets, oratorios and gem-like modern works—Brahms and Barber, Randall Thompson, Debussy and Distler—in a choir that met first period every day in high school. Beautiful years! All of it gorgeous and emotional, yet separate, mostly, from my Judaism. Would I allow myself to think about God while rehearsing Haydn's Creation, lost in the exquisite trio section of Psalm 19: The day that is coming speaks it the day, the night that is

gone to following night…? In a word, yes. Even so tortuously translated, it sang and it spoke. When the texts turned Christian—“For unto us a child is born”—I found a way. My cousin had a baby boy; Handel’s bursting fountain of sixteenth notes captured the miracle. On Sabbath and holidays in my Conservative synagogue, we prayed, well, differently; Cantor Victor Jacoby’s ringing baritone filled the room, brought down a heaven of its own. It was exotic, and it, too, was mine.

In college I began to feel more self-conscious about all this. Still hooked on choir, I noticed that the other choral majors sang in church groups and planned for church jobs. I also noticed that the occasional Jewish piece we sang was much less affecting than the Christian works. Then in graduate school, where I went to earn a Master of Music degree, I met my first important religious teacher, a secular Israeli: the great maestro Abraham Kaplan, whose father had formed the first choirs in Israel (then Palestine) and who himself spent 16 years teaching at Juilliard, directing New York’s Camarata Singers and preparing choirs for Leonard Bernstein. The first time I visited his study at the University of Washington, I saw on his desk a small stained-glass ornament that said, “The Lord works in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform.” Then, under his baton I sang the great Requiem masses of Mozart and Verdi, transported into a realm of holy inspiration grounded in texts that must have been relevant but that he didn’t believe either. Yet he led, and taught, with complete certainty, his interpretations informed by the text but transcending it; in performance it seemed he dissolved into the mind of the music. It’s a little hard to imagine if you haven’t performed with a great conductor, but perhaps if you’ve watched Dudamel you’ve seen it for yourself.

Of course this was very affirming. Professor Kaplan seemed to have no problem feeling and expressing the power of music as real or holy in a generic sort of way; like him, I could reject the meaning of the words without denying what the music was teaching me in vague spiritual terms. This now seems obvious; words are just humanity’s best attempt to share what people think they know—approximations, tools. No one would confuse the word “love” with the feeling, or say it encompassed it. So I could make a kind of separation in my mind between what the music offered and the words that had carried the composer to its discovery.

But it didn’t answer my religious questions. How was I to relate to God myself? Words are important too. Hadn’t God communicated with humanity that way? Calling Lekh lekha to Abraham, sending Moses off to Pharoah armed with verbal admonitions? Not to mention dictating the entire Torah, exactly general and specific enough to last 3,000 years so far and presumably to eternity? Whatever

I'd learned studying music, it wasn't the Torah. That was still to be found.

Around the same time I met Professor Kaplan, I also met another Presbyterian, though he considered himself "lapsed." This young man, a medical student, was also very concerned about both religion and words and—first one, then two conversions to Judaism later—he became my husband. He had a strong belief in God, but the religion he'd been raised with, he said, was built on metaphors, and the metaphors no longer made sense to him. This became an insurmountable problem for him as a Christian, but only increased his desire to understand what God really did want. Late into the night when he wasn't at the hospital, we would wrestle these questions together, until finally he started his residency and said he'd have to revisit religion when he was sleeping more than one night in three. That left me on my own for three years, during which I thought long and hard about whether Judaism might be wrong and Christianity right—I read the New Testament and wondered whether it was possible that God's kingdom was already here, and that all we had to do was love one another and He would be with us. I didn't have any Christian teachers outside of the great composers, but in any case I couldn't accept it, couldn't believe.

I went on to study journalism in New York while David finished his residency, and when we both returned to the Northwest, I invited him to visit the synagogue I'd joined in Tacoma, Washington. At Temple Beth El there, he found that the words of the Reform siddur Gates of Prayer made more sense to him than what he'd left behind in church. With Beth El's very thoughtful Rabbi Richard Rosenthal, z"l, he started reading Franz Rozensweig and Rav Kook, and studying them with him on Wednesdays. One day he asked what it would take to convert, and Rabbi Rosenthal said, "Whenever you're ready." David had a Reform conversion, and that meant—to my understanding and training at that time—that my best friend and I would be able to marry, and continue a religious journey together. A year and a half later, we did.

We ended up in Los Angeles in the post-denominational congregation of Reform Rabbi Mordecai Finley, whose services plus lunch and bentching lasted until 2 P.M. on Saturdays and who taught us not only the weekly parasha—including stories I'd never learned, like Jacob and Tamar, Pinhas, Bilaam, Nadav and Abihu—but also the concept of spiritual discipline, the idea that the ritual commandments provide opportunities for us to bring God into more of our day-to-day actions and that, moreover, they were in the text. This was something I'd been waiting for: a way to live with God in mind. Although they were presented as voluntary, I loved each new mitzvah and concept I discovered.

The Torah asks us not to eat pork or shellfish. The Torah tells us not to place a stumbling block before the blind, literally or metaphorically. The Torah—God's instructions!—held all sorts of commandments and stories, and by the way, many of them were very confusing without the interpretation of sages over the generations since. With that ancient elucidation, Rabbi Finley noted, they became both clear and ingenious—separating milk and meat, for example, as a way to delineate life and death in the world hour by hour; separating wool and flax, adjuring us to know when to be strong and forceful versus when to be soft. There were other commandments too, he noted, that we couldn't understand but could take on faith—faith, something that came easily to me!

Rabbi Finley also encouraged us to hear Orthodox teachers—one year he sent us out to Orthodox synagogues on Shabuoth, and my husband David and I actually went to B'nai David-Judea, which many years later would become our home. But religiously we were still comfortable where we were. I served as one of three lay cantors, singing and arranging prayers, even directing a choir and trying to find some spiritual richness in the music. I did, a little, especially Leonard Bernstein's Chichester Psalms. Our eldest daughter became bat mitzvah there, and when my beloved father died, there were tools both elevating and comforting with which to mourn him. We studied Hebrew with Rebbetzin Meirav Finley, and the holy language began to speak to us on its own.

It was a time of unfolding light, affirming to me what I'd long suspected: that my ancestors had hung on tight through persecution and pogroms to more than Shabbat candles and Pessah seders, as wonderful as those were. There was more there, enough to fill many lifetimes, and we were beginning to see what it was.

What drew us the rest of the way, once we encountered it, was the beauty of observance and a growing certainty that it was, in fact, commanded—as I'd sensed since high school, God surely cared what we actually did. We attended a three-part-seminar on the Orthodox view of marriage, taught by Rabbi Baruch Gradon of the Los Angeles Kollel, to which we were invited by friends who'd become Orthodox the year before, and after that I joined a series of living room classes sponsored by a Hareidi "outreach" organization called Ashreinu. The leaders of that group, Mrs. Shira Shapiro and Rabbi Moshe and Bracha Zaret, welcomed us into their modest homes for Shabbat dinners, the first we'd experienced in an observant setting, not minding that we drove there.

We were very moved by their example. Everyone at their tables, including the youngest of their children, could discuss the parasha better than most of the adult Jews we'd ever met. They were gracious and intelligent and their

conversation was always rich with meaning. They were notably comfortable talking about God—something I'd only been able to do before with my Christian friends in high school, and then with my husband. And they were distinctly un-cranky—about their children, their jobs, whatever they discussed. In these religious homes, everything was seen as a miracle—exactly as I had been experiencing life all along. A high goal, they said, was to see God behind every tree, every lamp, every occurrence—to see far more than met the eye.
In my new class, taught by Mrs. Ivy Kalazan, concept after new concept lit up my world.

The shofar, she taught us, represented the blowing of God's breath through the shell of our physicality. Our connection to God was un-severable, like the vertebrae of the spine, and could be damaged but never broken. The flame of Shabbat candles represented our yearning and reaching toward heaven, and the beauty of Judaism could bring holiness to a humble leaf of lettuce—by our washing and checking it to ensure it held no bugs. Everything physical has a spiritual correlate, she taught, and since God made men and women different physically, there must be spiritual differences as well.
This politically incorrect observation was something I'd always believed; here I had a religious explanation, grounded in the most basic understanding of creation.

I also read Blu Greenberg's How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household and started observing the mikvah laws on my own, and then I read Rabbi Ezriel Tauber's To Become One and studied privately; these laws and the concepts behind them, from the notion of what's hidden being the most sacred to the idea that water is the closest we have to a physical emanation of God's presence, were dazzling and answered questions I didn't know I had. They illuminated, decoded in a way, my relationship with my husband, while protecting it at the same time from any possibility of boredom or routine. These ideas are so basic to Orthodox understanding, growing out of hundreds of generations' grappling with text (in this case, Bereishith and Vayikra), and yet to David and me they were entirely new, while at the same time not seeming foreign. And it was ancient, proven wisdom: my grandmothers, and their grandmothers, had followed these laws. I was restoring a link in the chain.

For all of these reasons, really from the very first Orthodox lectures we attended, David and I began to walk our lives into this world of beauty and commandment. We loved our synagogue but my leading services on Shabbat mornings now seemed off; shouldn't I be present for my family, instead of warming up my

singing voice in the shower and getting ready to perform? We had long ago stopped shopping on Shabbat, but shouldn't we also stop driving, and gardening, and turning on the lights? It might mean alienating my non-observant Jewish family, not to mention David's Protestant one, which had been tested enough by his first conversion; it would also mean a second conversion for him. We loved our mixed neighborhood and we'd have to sell our home. We loved our local public school, but Ivy Kalazan taught in a religious high school—this material was available to children, during the day?—so they would change schools; that was probably the hardest thing of all. But we wanted them to know the beauty of this new way of life, and to understand it, just as we wanted them to take music lessons, study science and learn to read.

When the time came, we asked Shira Shapiro of Ashreinu to recommend a synagogue, and she suggested three: B'nai David, another that was Modern Orthodox and an Aish HaTorah center, all in Pico-Robertson—not the more Hareidi part of town where she lived. Later I asked her why, and she said that because I'd been leading services, she thought I'd be more comfortable in a synagogue where women had a larger role. That surprised me—it hadn't seemed important to me at the time—but it turned out to be good foresight on her part.

Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky, at B'nai David-Judea, won us right away. Rav Yosef's derashot were all about the text—how Moshe's trials inform our own, how commentators understand the characters through back stories gleaned from textual hints, how individual words—individual words!—open windows onto worlds of meaning beneath the surface, and how all of this calls us to high personal responsibility every moment of our lives. On top of that, B'nai David was full of people just like us; by some estimates, fewer than a third of its members (at least at that time) had been raised in Orthodox homes. We were greeted there with lunch and dinner invitations, Purim baskets, and Pessah recipes, shiurim about holidays, lashon haRa, medical ethics, and maintaining the dignity of the dead while preparing them for burial. We also heard, though less frequently, about mixed Arab-Jewish schools in the Negev, and occasionally we heard from Israeli thinkers and journalists, and leaders of projects for Ethiopian emigres or Darfur. We signed up to deliver meals to the poor through a program very careful to protect their anonymity. More recently, we've joined a group of about 15 congregants who meet bi-monthly with a similar demographic from the liberal Islamic Center of Southern California. Coming from such a rich and challenging intellectual world before Torah, all of this was absolutely necessary for us to be observant and still feel like ourselves. I think this is true of most of the congregation, and of all of our friends there.

I hadn’t thought the shul’s women’s tefillah group, called Shirat Chana, would matter to me; remember, I’d decided that leading services compromised my observance of Shabbat. But it turned out to be quite helpful in our transition; when my middle daughter was bat mitzvah age, she was able to lain and lead services just as her older sister had, albeit at Minha with only nine men allowed to be present. Other innovations I would appreciate only later: for example, women carrying the Torah through the women’s section, which thrills me every time, especially when I carry it myself. The mehitzah at B’nai David goes right down the middle, and women can get as close to the bima, the Torah and the derasha as any man can, meaning we can see and hear everything and move if we can’t. Women at my shul say Kaddish, and I am able to say Kaddish for my father every fall. Sometimes we have women as scholars-in-residence, a woman is president of the congregation this year, and I myself am a kind of gabbai: for seven years now, I’ve been in charge of arranging which men and boys will lead Shabbat Shaharit, Musaf, and Anim Zemirot. David and I did not join B’nai David-Judea for any of this, but I would have felt much less included—and increasingly so, as time went on—without them. Because our journey has always been a joint one, if I were not fully involved (my husband does go to daily minyan on his own, a pleasure for him), it’s hard to see how it could have endured.

I’m not saying it’s been perfect. We had to step farther out of the world we knew than I had expected. Travel is harder, most restaurants are out. Raising our son and daughters, some things turned out to be impossible because of Shabbat; sadly for me, this included Los Angeles’ excellent children’s choir, along with any high school with a full orchestra or band. Even at Shalhevet High School, which is unusual in its attention to the arts, against the competing demands of four Judaic classes and a full academic program, the choir I direct meets just twice a week after school—far short of what defined my own high school years. This kind of thing has raised questions that Modern Orthodoxy tries to answer but doesn’t quite—for example, does God want us to be a light unto the nations while hiding our children away in schools with only one another, at a time and place in history when children learn together from every place on earth?

Also, I sometimes encounter signs of tribal chauvinism—a sense that Jews are somehow superior, ethnically, culturally, or otherwise, to non-Jews. This is beyond my ken, and strikes me as wholly unworthy of a worldview that celebrates the ultimate value of every human being.

But no culture is perfect, and every choice has its price. David and I still live in the big, diverse city of Los Angeles; we’re still news junkies; and we’re still hopelessly romantic about the flow of history and our small place in it—now we’re tied to a

particular strand, one that feels ancient, eternal, and true. The evidence we have for this is partly on paper and partly in our hearts, as close as breathing and a just a bookshelf away.

And Modern Orthodoxy opened to us huge troves of text, all growing from the root of the Torah like the branches of a flowering tree, exquisite separately and together. That is what I set out so many years ago to find: a way to follow God’s instructions, one that works in the world we live in with all its challenges and mystery, and that ties us to God. Whatever our failings, David and I now can try to make our lives the fullest possible expression of those instructions as we are so grateful to finally understand them. This is a gratefulness that goes, and takes us, far beyond words.