

What Converts Talk About (When Jews Aren't Around)

by Angela Himsel

Jewish history hinges upon a particular female convert named Ruth. To her mother-in-law, Naomi, a Bethlehemite, Ruth spoke the immortal words, "Whither thou goest, I will go...thy people shall be my people, and thy God, my God." I, as well as other converts to Judaism, have discovered what Ruth wisely understood 4,000 years ago: It's a package deal. It's a religion, but also a land and a people.

I converted ten years ago. Though born and raised in a quite religious Christian family, I had never understood how one God could be broken down into God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Beyond the mathematical puzzle, I balked at the notion that somebody else could pay the price for my sins, and that only in accepting this dead deity as my savior could I get to heaven.

At the age of 19, my spiritual search took me to Israel, and by 22, in New York, I had met a fellow who turned out to be a serial *shiksa*-dater and got it into his head that he, his family and the entire Jewish community would be happier if I were Jewish. But I still wasn't ready to make the big leap of faith.

Then, quite unexpectedly, I got pregnant. Who knows, God may have "given me conception," as He did with Ruth. He undoubtedly knew that, left to my own devices, I would glide along, uncommitted, for a long time. Eleven years ago, six months pregnant and single, I decided to start the conversion process with an Orthodox rabbi. My future husband's family was Orthodox and I didn't want there ever to be any doubts about my children's legitimacy as Jews.

When I met with the rabbi for the first time, he asked me general questions about Judaism, quizzed me about holidays and blessings and rituals. What he did not talk about, to my puzzlement, was redemption, the meaning of life, or Jesus. He never asked me about my faith or lack of faith, or if I was sure I was ready to give up Christianity and Jesus. It was

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almost as if Jesus were an ex-husband, an embarrassing relative we'd rather not discuss in polite company.

Perhaps that's why, across a crowded *bris*, when my eyes meet those of another convert, within moments, we are whispering not about our first tentative taste of chopped liver but about how we could be so happy with a piece of bacon right about now, and how about that Christmas tree?

Last year, the week after Rosh Hashana, I met two friends, Julie and Lisa—fellow converts—for lunch at a cozy diner on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Lisa, a fair-haired, soft-spoken woman in her 20s, had converted two years before with an Orthodox rabbi. Julie, dark-haired and vivacious with a quick laugh, had within the year completed a Reform conversion.

Lisa launched almost immediately into her experience celebrating Rosh Hashana for the first time as a Jew: "The first day, David and I get to *shul* early, like always. Right away, the women start gossiping, about who's sick, who grew up in Brooklyn with them, who's renovating their bathroom, and I can't concentrate—not that I can understand Hebrew..." I had forgotten that some people actually went to synagogue expecting uninterrupted and meaningful prayer time. Clearly, Lisa had not been Jewish as long as I had.

"So the second day," Lisa continued, "I figured I would come late for *shul*. Afterward, David said that, you know when they're bringing the Torah around and you're supposed to kiss it? Well, the rabbi stopped in David's row and whispered, 'Where's Lisa?' Can you believe the rabbi stopped the service to ask, 'Where's the convert?' The other Jewish wives can sleep in late and the rabbi doesn't notice because they're Jewish and they'll always be Jewish, but me, I'm late and who knows—maybe I've slipped?"

Julie jumped in, "None of the Jews I know

went to temple for Rosh Hashana. Do you know what Seth did for Rosh Hashana? He took his kids out for lobster. Lobster! Seth's ex-wife says, 'Julie's not Jewish.' His ex doesn't go to temple, but I'm the convert and I should go?" Julie readily admitted that she converted less from conviction than from a desire to marry her husband. "I often think God put Seth in front of me as a test, and I chose Seth over Jesus," she said.

We bounced from gefilte fish ("I hate it!" Julie said. "When I see the gefilte coming, my coat's on.") to excessive bar mitzvahs to an appreciation for the emphasis on family within Judaism, finally alighting on the other favorite topic of discussion among converts: Jesus.

"What do you think of Jesus now?" I asked.

"I think there's a convert purgatory," Julie said. "God says you were for Jesus once but now you're Jewish, so..." In other words, you get credit for once being Christian but you don't make it all the way to heaven because you betrayed Jesus.

"I can just see," Julie went on, "Jesus is up there in heaven and He's saying, 'Thanks a lot, Julie, you Judas Iscariot...'" I told my husband I feel like Judas Iscariot and he said, 'Who?'

"It's in the afterlife that it all comes into play," Lisa responded, so quietly that I had to ask her to repeat it. "It's then that your soul is judged."

"And Jews don't really believe in an afterlife," Julie added.

"Well, they do," I argued, "but most of them don't know they're allowed to. *Olam ha-ba*, the world to come, is a part of Jewish theology, but I think they don't stress it much because they don't want us to worry about the next life and ignore what we need to do in this life." Though I defended Judaism, I understood this struggle, possibly specific to former Christians, to understand, "What next? Will I make it? What's God's plan? How about the Messiah and redemption? Redeeming the world is great, but what about me?"

I've always been puzzled as to why most brands of Judaism shy away from the Messiah. Is it not intellectual enough? Too *hasidic*? Too Christian? I was secretly disappointed that Judaism promoted no plan for the afterlife. In not addressing these issues, whether because the afterlife is not considered as crucial as learning the proper blessing to say over a snack, then by default, Judaism has ceded to other religions the opportunity to define the Big Picture and



our own little individual part in it.

I asked Julie and Lisa if they felt Jewish. Julie gave a flat "No." Although Lisa does feel Jewish, she feels she'll never really be accepted. "I'll always be a *gera*." A convert.

Ruth was known as Ruth the Moabitess (i.e., not an Israelite) until she married Boaz. After that, she was plain old Ruth. Though 3,000 years may separate us, like Ruth, I do feel like one of the family now, with no appellation. This spring on Shavuot, I will sit in the synagogue with the rest of the House of Israel and listen to the Ten Commandments and the book of Ruth being read. Shavuot commemorates the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai, when the entire Jewish people accepted the Law.

According to the book, Ruth heard no voice calling her, as Abraham did, to leave her land and people. If she heard a call from God, it was a personal, silent, hidden call, meant for her alone. On Shavuot, in linking the Book of Ruth with the Ten Commandments, we understand that the universal God at Mt. Sinai and the individual God in the book of Ruth are one and the same. So I will not feel myself a *gera*, a convert, among strangers.

And I will find there, too, connections to the redemptive vision on which I was raised. The book of Ruth opens with a reference to both spiritual as well as physical barrenness. It ends with a harvest and with the birth of Ruth's child, Obed, the grandfather of King David, the progenitor of the future Messiah. Physically and spiritually, the people and the land, the seed and the soil, were barren no longer. And through the seed and soul, through the generations of David, God offers the promise of redemption for the entire world.

I've not, like Ruth, adopted Israel as my physical homeland, but my seed, my children, have connected me more powerfully to Jews worldwide than I might have been otherwise. But ultimately, it's not a piece of land, or even my children, which link me invisibly to the Jewish people. Rather, it is a text that has been passed down from generation to generation. By however circuitous a route that text came to me, now I live, too, within that text, and I am one of the people of the Book. ■

Angela Himsel's writing has appeared in *Tikkun*, *Partisan Review*, *BOMB* and other magazines. She has recently completed a novel, and lives in New York City.

We chat about
excessive bar
mitzvahs and
the admirable
emphasis on
family, finally
alighting on
another
favorite topic
among
converts:
JESUS.