

CALL OF THE JEWISH SOUL

by Lisa Raphael

I never knew that I had a Jewish soul. I knew that my origins were Jewish, but denied my identity because of the trauma associated with being Jewish.

My family did its best to save me from the restrictions associated with being Jewish. My paternal grandfather had my father and his brothers baptized in order to open vocational opportunities otherwise denied in Catholic Austria. My mother, from an orthodox Jewish father and a liberal Jewish mother converted when she married him. The hope was that we children could pass, assimilate, live free and clear of anti-Semitic bias. This did not help in 1938! Because of my Jewish blood, I was subject to eight months of Nazi occupation during which none of us knew if we would survive, followed by my immediate family's exodus to Outback Australia, where my father was lucky to find work as a farm hand.

Although my family tried its best to assimilate, I never felt that I belonged in Australia. I left as soon as I could and became the quintessential wandering Jew. roving from country to country and job to job looking for a place to call home. I felt immediately at home in the USA. Europe had the culture but not my language. Australia had my language but not my culture. America had both an ethnically diverse culture that included Jews, and the language I grew up with. Nevertheless, I still felt restless, and began to look inside myself, to the emotional trauma and turmoil that were my personal legacy from the Holocaust, to get to the root of my continued sense of alienation.

Graduate studies in psychology and my own psychotherapy helped resolve the grief and fear caused by the multiple childhood losses, and to feel emotionally secure enough to get married. My American, non-Jewish husband, whose parents had fled the Communists revolution in Russia, shared my feeling of displacement from his roots, and was emotionally as Jewish as was I. Nevertheless, my Jewish roots were further concealed in my marriage.

My sixteen-year marriage was in many ways like the Jewish stay in Egypt. It provided shelter, comfort, and a sense of security. My husband and I brought my parents to the United States to live ten minutes from our home, and as the other surviving members of our family were already in this country, the scattering of our family in 1939 seemed to be overcome. I was once again affiliated with a family tribe of parents, brother, nieces, stepchildren and grandchildren.

But something still was missing. Our family had no spiritual base. None of us openly acknowledged our Judaism, nor did we practice rituals or observances of ANY religion. So I began a spiritual quest - a search for my soul. My quest lead me in many directions. I celebrated Easter in the Christian commune in which my mother's sister was raising her family, danced with the Sufis, meditated with the Buddhists, went on a vision quest to the Mayan ruins,

and investigated Unity, Unitarian, Church of Religious Science and metaphysical congregations. In the course of these investigations, I found my personal, spiritual identity, my connection with the One, and noticed its absence in my marriage and family.

Leaving my marriage was like another exodus. The marriage that had provided shelter and security had become oppressive. The husband who had been a comfort to an insecure, child-like woman became repressive towards an adult with a mind of her own. The yearning for freedom to express my spiritual Self wrenched me away from the comfort of home and family as surely as it propelled my ancestors out of Egypt. It was during the intensive residential workshop I attended to help find the courage to leave my family that I first heard "the call of the Jewish soul."

I had taken the symbolic step of walking away from the building in which we were living into the wilderness behind the house. As I stood alone in the wilderness of trees, shrubs, stones and insects meditating, I heard the name "ELIJAH" resound in my head. The call was repeated three times. There was not a living soul around.

The biblical story of Elijah seemed to fit in a way. Leaving a marriage that had become false to my spiritual truth was a like Elijah burning the false idols. My flight involved a wilderness of Court Hearings and injunctions and lost family connections: my step children sided with my husband, my mother got cancer and relocated to live with my brother out of State, and my husband behaved like a real Jezebel, threatening my life, having me followed by detectives and forcing me into unfamiliar surroundings. Yet I still denied my Judaism. Then more signs began to appear. When I looked at the calendar after the last of the heart-wrenching, long drawn out court hearings for the divorce, I noticed that it was the first day of Hanukah. The ritual I created to change my name included a Mikvah, (a ritual bath) a Jewish tradition of which I was unaware at the time, and was coincidentally scheduled for the week-end of Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year). Even my new name, my mother's maiden name, Raphael, has its source with a Hebrew ancestor.

On a journey to sacred sites in Egypt years later, as we approached the temple of the crocodile king, Sobek, I found myself drawn to buy a black galabaya, (a garment worn by Egyptian men and women,) although even as I bought it, I disliked it.

Suddenly, the whole cocktail of negative emotions that stemmed from my childhood displacement by the Holocaust surfaced, and I envisioned myself angrily tossing that ugly black thing in the Nile. When I processed these feelings, I realized that the black galabaya was a metaphor for the suffering and alienation of the ancient Hebrews in Egypt, and that I was experiencing deep ancestral memory. Initiates in the past were tested by having to swim through a canal of water filled with crocodiles as a way of overcoming their fear.

As I tossed that black garment, that shroud representing feelings of victimization, alienation and fear into the Nile, it felt like a ritual burial of all the barriers I had felt, as a human and as a Jew, to full acceptance of every aspect of my identity.

Each of us has Jewish soul. Each of us has, at times, felt fearful, powerless, victimized and alienated. Each of us carries individual and ancestral memory of and fear and persecution. I did not toss that black garment into the Nile alone. Every member of my group, including the Egyptian guide, participated in energetically and physically releasing the yolk of fear and alienation. May we each find the freedom to step openly into all of who we are.