**Farewell to my American community for which I have searched so long**

Viva Hammer

Weeks before I left Australia forever, bulldozing through final law school exams, I was called upon to form a women’s prayer group.

I had only myself to blame for this. Ever since coming back to Australia from America, I had been speaking at every corner about women gathering in prayer. My proselytizing had resulted in a flurry of voices imploring me to organize a prayer group in Australia too.

Much was at stake for me in those final weeks of study, but I could not refuse the pleadings, and so the preparations began.

Men’s prayer comes together so effortlessly. Boys train and observe the experts, until the moment of readiness, when the baton passes unnoticed.

Every day, twice a day, a boy waits for his moment, while his sister watches. Creating a prayer service entirely of girl novices, who have spent their lives watching, never having been apprenticed or even mingled with the performers, is like conducting a symphony with an orchestra of nursery children. You might lose a few notes.

Volunteers gathered: One girl had the urge to read Torah, the Liberal rabbi lent a Torah scroll, and my parents opened their home. We planned to meet on a Sunday Rosh Hodesh.

Everything was done in secret. A few years before, the REITS 5 –a subset of Yeshiva University rabbis – had flung out its denunciation of women’s prayer groups, and ugly scenes sometimes flared when they started across America. I knew opposition was possible, and I wanted to avoid a battle as long as possible.

I hoped in vain

One day I answered the phone to a caller I had never spoken to before: the rabbi of a large empty synagogue, who would be labeled Modern Orthodox. On another day, a Hassidic rabbi phoned.

Both spat abuse at me for several hours.

Their irrationality, heavy handedness and inappropriateness made it all sound like one voice. I was a mischief maker, they said. As a result of my activities, a new denomination of Judaism would spring up. The denomination of women’s prayers? I wondered.

“Who are these women who are attracted to this thing?” they demanded. “Marginal, dissatisfied types. They will spread the word to other women, who are happy in their roles, make them question, put evil thoughts in their heads.” I doubted that contented women would be affected by this. And if they are led to questions because of our quiet prayers, are you so sure that they are contented?

“And your women, do they daven (pray) every day? Why are they suddenly enthusiastic about a Sunday morning service? Why don’t they go to a *real* shul and hear a *real* Torah reading if they are so keen?”

Then they dug at me with legal arguments. “How can you cart around a sefer Torah like that? It’s a desecration to open it for a nonholy purpose! Are you going to say *blessings* over the reading?”

They ended with curses. I was a cursed woman for my brazenness, my disrespect of tradition, of the sefer Torah, of the community.

I cried after I hung up from these encounters. It was horrible being cursed, even by rabbis who talked a jumble of nonsense. But their words did not deter me.

My father almost did. We were walking to shul and my father told me he had been denied an honor in the service because of my activities.

“My darling, I am asking you, please don’t do this thing. When I was teaching under communism, being a frum Jew became almost impossible. Kashrus, Shabbos, davening if it would have become known that I was keeping these...”

He grimaced, remembering. “I know this is important to you, but I can’t bear that people will turn their heads away from me because of it. I have been through so much.”

I should have capitulated, thrown it all away, but I sensed my father

was paranoid. I told him gently I couldn’t give it up; I refused to be bullied by the rabbis as if they were Stalin’s flunkies. Australia was a free country.

Soon after, the rabbi of my father’s shul offered to lend prayer books for our service. I was so relieved: my father’s rabbi was behind us! My women’s spiritual needs would not be satisfied at the cost of my father’s.

Rosh Hodesh came; 23 women and a sefer Torah packed into our living room. The voices were halting; none was used to being asked to sing together. But the glory was hearing the brief gasps as the women were called to the Torah, watching those lithe black figures pulsing across the incandescent scroll: black fire upon white fire.

I took my exams, flew off to America. Fifteen years later, one of the rabbis who had cursed me wrote asking for forgiveness. He held a women’s prayer group in his own synagogue now, he said.

That women’s prayer group in my parents’ home was thirty years ago. I left my home and my family and came to America to find community and I wandered here and there and failed to find it, till now, till I came here. Here at Rosh Pina you welcomed me and you asked me to participate. You include people like me who do not look like you and who are not in your demographic category.

I have been seeking this community thirty years, but many of you were not *born* when I came looking for you, this community and those like us were born because of the search of Jews like me. It became possible to have what we have here because we were allowed to yearn for it.

The rabbis who cursed me were right, we *were* the harbingers of a new denomination, where women and men could pray and read Torah together.

Thirty years is a long time looking for a place to belong, and now after tasting the good of community - and it is good - I am going back to take care of my parents who opened their home to my spiritual quest and supported me unstintingly as I’ve wandered the earth.

At Rosh Pina, I am astounded at your generosity of time to each other, in reading Torah, leading services, kiddushing, setting up and putting away. Scheduling, organizing, all the unglamorous and blessed deeds that make a community.

And now I have a favor to ask, please keep on doing the good work of community, welcoming strangers. Please be here still when I come back to look for you and join back with you in prayer and Torah and kiddush.

Shabbat shalom

Hodesh tov

Shana tova umetuka