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Women's Whispers: Ten righteous souls

By VIVA HAMMER
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Washington was the city of storms last winter. Drifting white avalanches flattened the accumulated cynicisms of the capital, a wordless prophetic damnation.

One Shabbat morning, we looked out and saw the snow had fallen higher than a woman's thigh. I would have wrapped myself one fold tighter into my eiderdown and dreamed a day of rest. But my daughter Meira and I had made a promise in full knowledge of the blizzard, to rise and make ready for our minyan, Segulah.

On a clear day, Segulah is an easy halfhour walk from our home through major Washington thoroughfares. That Shabbat, the earth was new again and unformed; we forged our own paths, feet sinking deep into the great yielding softness.

If we had merely been zealous about communal prayer, we could have attended the local synagogue which is not three minutes from our home and seven with the snow. This is where our menfolk worship, but we cannot abide it. It is a soulless place, where the songs were long ago forgotten, replaced with announcements which run neck and neck with the kiddush club as the most venerated parts of the service. Meira and I prefer to spend our Shabbat mornings wandering through Brookside Gardens.

Meira received her religious initiation with kollel wives at the county cloister. Their singular ambition was to convert girls into Torah-true wives and mothers. Bible and commentaries were mere preludes for discourses on the proper *tafkid* (role) of the woman – to be at home serving her husband and children. Meanwhile, in the toilets, girls were stripping for Facebook uploads. Meira felt safe neither in the classrooms nor

the bathroom, so she left.

It wasn't soon enough to prevent a crisis of faith. In the wake of those pious kollel rants, my daughter stopped praying, lost her belief in God and ended fealty to Jewish law. Ritual particularly chafed at her, and she refused to join in any kind of religious service. Being the exceptional person she is, everything was done with the utmost respect to our family's faith and observance. So instead of hearing shofar on Rosh Hashana, she baby-sat for a parent who would not otherwise have arrived in time for the blasts.

While I accepted Meira's religious upheaval as I do everything about her, her father Aaron took it hard. For him, Judaism is constituted by two things: Talmud and Halacha. The Lord's earth and anything in it are dismissed as rubbish unless they can be caught within the lattice of learning and law.

As Meira traveled through faithlessness to throwing over her Jewish identity, becoming citizen of the world, Aaron realized that what she chose to dispense with in her journey might be connected with the abundant Jewish harvest he had tossed into his rubbish bin. Indeed, those things might have value for someone who found Talmud and the law rancid and petty. They might be better than nothing.

About a year ago, Segulah sprang up in our neighborhood: a full-liturgy, songful, egalitarian davening within a warm, welcoming community. It would never have occurred to me to go. All my life I have attended Orthodox services, and consider myself loyal to Halacha. Segulah offered equal opportunity to women and men. How could I, in good conscience, attend?

But Aaron, the Brisker scholar, urged me to go and to take Meira. He apparently thought it was better that she participate in an egalitarian service than be lost to our people. So we came, and we prayed: both of us. We refused honors – to read the Torah or lead prayers. For our separate reasons, we were both willing members and conscientious objectors. But we attended, religiously.

The week the blizzard was forecast for Washington, I had promised to come early to set up at Segulah. Now, it should be known that my teenage daughter does not naturally set out for shul at 7:30 on a Saturday morning. Some might have considered it a cruelty to have asked her to leave her feather-down bed while a mad blanket of snow fell outside.

But that morning she left the warmth of our home and forged a path with me to shul. We arrived before the building was open; we moved furniture and transported books when it was unlocked. We were the ninth and 10th in the minyan.

Leaving services, Meira uttered a confession. For the first time, she felt she had counted, and one day she might take an aliya, learn to chant the Torah. Women miss out on the choicest rewards in traditional Judaism, because they are exempt from the choicest commandments.

Most peculiarly, we learn about *s'char p'siot* – the reward for walking to shul – from a widow who daily traversed from one end of town to the other to attend services (*Sota 22a*). The reward accrued to the widow even though women are not obligated to pray with the community. That stormy Shabbat, arriving before the janitor after a forging a new path, my daughter received her *s'char p'siot*. Flowing naturally from the obligation fulfilled, she envisaged her coming obligations – learning, reading, leading.

Abraham battled with God to save Sodom if there were 50, then 45, then 30, then 20, then 10 righteous persons. God conceded each time. And if women had been among the last 10 righteous souls, should the city not have been saved?

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