

I dropped out of university in December 1970. I became a hippie and a wandering Jew, hoping to find some peace and meaning for my life. I hitchhiked on Route 61, going south (birds and Jews are smart to do that in the US in winter) to New Orleans, Louisiana and on to Atlanta, Georgia. I stayed at Emory University with some people I had met on the streets. Before long I "fell in love" and moved in with a woman seven years my senior. We used to attend the Unitarian church she liked on Sunday mornings. She was open-minded and I just wanted to be with her. I found the church dull, but not offensive to me as a Jew, since there were no real and absolute statements made about God or other religions.

Then, one Sunday afternoon in February, a group of four well-dressed men approached me on Peachtree Street in Atlanta. They looked foreign with their crewcuts and their white shirts and thin ties. It was 1971 and I was a classic hippie with long hair and beads, either sandals or no shoes and tie-dye T-shirt. These men were aliens to me. And their message was just as alien.

One of them used the expression "turn or burn" as they told me that if I didn't accept Jesus, I would go to hell. I told them that I was Jewish and their religion made no sense to me. I wanted no part of their message. Their words conjured up images of burning bodies during the Holocaust and of White Supremacists burning crosses on the lawns of Jews and Blacks.

I was angry at these men. In fact, I hated them.

It wasn't that I objected to Jesus. I didn't know enough about him to object or not. But I hated people telling me that I needed their religion-that mine was somehow not good enough.

I responded to these four men fiercely, yelling at them, saying that they knew nothing about Jewish people or our problems! Who were they to tell me to join them in eternity-they wanted to convert me to their gentile god? What rubbish! Quit being a Jew? I don't think so.! I was loud and raging. I think they got the point. I felt perfectly righteous in my response. Yet other things had pointed out to me that I was in no way righteous.

For example, just weeks before that, I had spent some time in New Orleans, Louisiana. There, I saw myself for what I was one morning on Bourbon Street. It was about 3 A.M. I had spent the day lying in Jackson Square Park outside of the Catholic cathedral. Occasionally, I picked up my 12-string guitar and strummed popular tunes like "Suite: Judy Blue Eyes" from Crosby Stills and Nash and "Knights in White Satin" from the Moody Blues. Crowds gathered and sang along. It was like a Southern love-in. What a time! That night, a group of us began to dance on the streets outside a jazz-filled nightclub. We were all in a chain, dancing our way down the narrow street weaving our way through the

tourists and the hawkers. I felt so full of peace and love and happiness. Then I looked to my right and saw a man standing next to me-and I despised him. It was unreasonable. I didn't know him, except to observe that his skin was a different color than mine, he was missing a pair of front teeth and he was sweaty. I was ashamed of how I felt. Here I was, supposedly a man of peace and love, yet I didn't love this man. I knew it was wrong to be racist, but I had no control over my feelings. I simply hated him. I knew that he didn't deserve it-and I knew that I was a hypocrite.

A few weeks later, I was newly arrived in Atlanta and looking for a place to sleep. I heard about a crash pad and I went to stay there. While a fellow traveler was in the showers cleaning up from his day, I rifled his trousers looking for cash. Sure enough, I found a \$5 bill and took it, pocketing it while no one looked. The guilt was horrible inside me, but what was I to do? I was hungry; I had been panhandling, begging, and here was an easy five-spot. I knew that it was wrong, but again I felt unable to do otherwise. Where could I turn? That moment still stands out to me as shameful.

I went to Washington D.C. and marched for peace, but I knew . . . I was not truly a man of peace. I was a person who could hate people I didn't know. I was a person who could steal. From Atlanta, I visited my sister in Miami and had some significant albeit seedy encounters there during my stay.

Return to Kansas City

Within the year, I returned to Kansas City. I had taken a beating, mentally and emotionally. I had not found the answers I thought would be forthcoming from my wandering hippie lifestyle. My father bought me a one-way ticket from Washington D.C. so that I could celebrate Passover with the family. Passover-- there's an idea. Good food, a clean bed, some familiarity.

So, the day arrived. The family had gathered and everything was as I remembered it. Good dishes. Beautiful soup and matzo balls, gefilte fish and horseradish, brisket and tsimmes, kugel and matzo. "home" cooking as usual. I slept in the next morning.

Our family used to have two seders, for some reason. So, night #2, again we gathered, Uncle Lou and Auntie and their daughters, Grandma Bessie, Bubbe, Mom, Dad and Judy. We began the seder but when we started to read the Haggadah I interrupted. "Are we going to do the same thing that we do every year?" No one was prepared for that. "What do you mean?" they wanted to know.

"It's just that every year we say the same words-but do we know what we are saying? Can't we just talk through the seder tonight?" I asked. My mother was very keen to see some changes anyway, so she stood up and said, "I have an idea. Let's have Robert lead the seder tonight!" Normally

my parents (and most others) call me Bob. "Robert" was used only if I was in trouble or about to be honored. I didn't know if I was in trouble or not, but my father agreed to my mother's proposal. We began to celebrate the seder and to interpret the exodus from Egypt in light of the civil rights movement and the need for all people to be free. We followed the Haggadah loosely, but we didn't rely on the text as we moved through the celebration.

We reached the part of the Haggadah that reads, "Let us sing unto the Lord a new song, praise ye the Lord, Hallelujah."

"What song do we sing now?" my mother wanted to know. I was well aware of the melody and the words we would traditionally sing at that point, but instead, I suggested, "Let's really sing a new song." My sister and cousin Janet began to sing a popular rock and roll song about Jeremiah (not the prophet, but the bullfrog) by a group called "Three Dog Night." The song, ("Joy to the World") was a fun song for teens, but it had nothing to do with the exodus or the spirit of the evening. I said, "No, let's sing something else." However, my sister and cousin-enchanted with the freedom of the evening-continued to sing. My other cousin, Nancy, and I began singing "Hallelujah," the chorus from Handel's "Messiah."

Imagine the cacophony! Bullfrogs and omnipotence! One grandmother wondered loudly what was going on while the other yelled at my father to make us stop. When the noise level rose to the breaking point my father

yelled, "Shah!" The room was hushed. Everyone looked at my father. He picked up the Haggadah and began to read at the point we had stopped. I pushed back from the table, announcing, "That was my fourth cup," and left.

Outside I wondered, "What do I do now?" No one ever left the seder early. At least not in my household. And certainly not before the huge meal! The moon was full. I looked up to heaven. I'd rarely spoken to God in English before. Not much beyond, "Now I lay me down to sleep," when I was a young boy. That night was different. I looked up and said, "Sir. Here I am, trying to bring meaning and relevance to the seder. I'm trying to make it ours. But those people in there (my family) are hypocrites. They don't even believe in you (that was actually not true) and they don't care about anything but getting to page 28 (when we eat). Here I am, trying to do it right and they are still in there going through the motions. Is there another way?" I had more to say, but that was the gist of my prayer. Is there another way?

That night I had what would be called a 'nervous breakdown.' One by one, members of the families came into my room when I came back inside. I began packing and saying I was going to be back hitchhiking on the road to Boston (It was Spring by then, 17 April). They each tried to convince me to go back to the table, to apologize, to eat something. But I was unable to 'get it together.' I ranted some lines from the Harold Pinter play, "The Dwarfs" in which I had acted at Wash U the year before.

Disjoint. Lost. Unable. That's what I would have said of myself.

The family called my old pediatrician, Dr Kantor and he came on a house call. He gave me a sedative in a needle and that calmed me, but within days I was put into Menorah Hospital, where I had been born 19 years earlier, on 1 East, the psychiatric wing. There I was housed with others who were experiencing difficulties in life, inability to 'get it together'. I learned macrame and decoupage in therapy. They tried to give me lithium, but I managed to 'under tongue' the daily pill and spit it out soon after the small cup was in my hand. For 30 days or so, I was there, and finally the doctors decided to release me. They categorized me as sufficiently done. "Paranoid schizophrenic" was their diagnosis. And they had concluded their treatment.

Three significant people

The last few days I was on 1 East, I met another teenager named Marva who was placed there by her parents. She had been raised in a Christian home but had recently had some kind of personal and intense experience with Jesus. She wanted to tell me about it. Since her thoughts about Jesus included thoughts about me, I tolerated what she had to say.

The Friday, I was walking near the hospital near Volker Park, home of the Nelson Art Gallery. It is a pristine site in the historic Country Club Plaza. In 1971, it was a gathering place for hippies who congregated there each Sunday afternoon, listening to rock music and tossing Frisbees.

As I passed two young people, one of them cried out, "Do you know the Lord is with you?" Oy, I thought. More of those "Jesus people." Like the ones in Atlanta. But strangely, I stopped, asking myself, "Why do I always walk past those people?" I turned around and walked back to them with a challenge. "I'm Jewish; give it your best shot." I knew they wanted to convert me to their blond-haired, blue-eyed god. I'd seen the movies.

Pam and John flipped open their Bibles and began telling me about Jesus right out of the book. They answered some of my questions but were stumped by others I raised. When I asked them about peace on the earth, they answered that they had peace. Personally! They said that when I accepted Jesus, the sky would be bluer and the grass would be greener! Their experience of Christianity was alive and they wanted me to experience it, too. This was so different from my experience in Atlanta. These enthusiastic people had something that they wanted to share with me. And since (unlike Marva), I had no particular interest in them personally, I found myself curious about what they were saying.

Still, I was Jewish and it was my duty to refute these nice people and their nice religion. It was not new for me to discuss religion in this way. Jimmy, the baal teshuva from summer camp had given me a book. The title was something like *Missionaries at the Door*, and it provided responses to those who might try to convert Jews to Christianity. I had read that book. John and Pam were out of their league and I won the religion battle. But

they won a bigger battle, and so I continued thinking about Jesus.

They won me with their humility. They admitted they did not have all the answers. I'd never heard of religious people not having all the answers-or at least openly admitting they didn't. Every religious person I'd ever met seemed fairly confident in his or her own ability to answer any objection and query. Here were two Christians, ministers I thought, who admitted what they didn't know. Nor did they seem flustered or upset to have to do so. That was very refreshing. Their confidence in the answers they did offer was not based on who they were, but in the One of whom they spoke.

They pointed me to the Source. They urged me to go talk to God and to ask him for answers that they could not provide. That was new. If you wanted to know anything in Orthodox Judaism, you would go to the Talmud or to a rabbi. You would read a book. Ask God? Not likely! He was too busy. And besides, I wasn't altogether sure that he cared about me. Well, these people were absolutely convinced that he did, and that I should be in touch with him about Jesus.

After that encounter, I wanted to talk to Marva again. Whatever interest I may have had in her was eclipsed by the challenge I had decided to take: to find out about Jesus for myself.

It was Friday. We stayed up that entire night reading from the New Testament. We began in the first book, the Gospel of Matthew, and