

A Leap of Faith

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The first time I heard *Lech Lecha*, I heard it in my heart. I felt it. To me, *Lech Lecha* means: to go to myself, for myself, and take a leap of faith.

BECOMING

Once or twice in a lifetime

A man or woman may choose

A radical leaving, having heard

Lech lecha — Go forth.

God disturbs us toward our destiny

By hard events

And by freedom's now urgent voice

Which explode and confirm who we are.

We don't like leaving,

But God loves becoming.

Norman Hirsh, from *Mishkan T'filah*, (p. 231)

Originally published in his book of poetry *God Loves Becoming*

I've discovered that taking leaps of faith is the way to resilience of spirit. True, we can't always be certain of the outcome we plan, but when we take that leap of faith, the results can be larger, deeper, and have a more lasting impact than we ever dreamed possible.

I was in high school, not in possession of the words or tools to consciously decide to go to myself, for myself, and take a leap of faith.

The eldest of three in a non-practicing Christian household I hungered for community and spirituality. I took every opportunity to barrage my English and History teachers with theologically philosophical questions. However, my hunger remained unsatisfied.

My parents had rejected their staunch Catholic and generic Christian upbringings, preferring to raise their children without the structure a formal religious life provides. My quest drove them a little crazy when at age 16, I demanded they accompany me to the various churches my friends belonged to: the Catholic Church, the Episcopalian, the Lutheran one, each Sunday a different field research day for me. They were patient and kind during this process, but finally had enough after the Sunday sermon at one of the more formal, rigid Protestant houses of worship. I don't remember the message from the pulpit that morning, but I do recall the stern expressions on my tired parents' faces, incredulous that they were listening to scripture at this ungodly hour before noon on Sunday.

Later that morning, they sat me down and explained their position on organized religion: they felt it was the root of all the world's problems. "So, sweetie, that's enough. We admire your efforts. But we think that when you go to college you can find your religion there."

While I loved their kind delivery, they were missing my point. I believed our kooky, confusing, close-knit family could use the traditions, the order of things. I believed we needed community. I coveted my friends' connections to other families in town, the way, it seemed to me that neighbors looked after them, had their backs. I believed in my heart that our family's personal problems would be more gracefully navigated if we were part of something bigger than us.

I craved a community. But even more than that, beyond that, I craved a consistent presence with the bigger questions that could make small the inevitable bumps and bruises being human causes. I craved a community to confirm the knowledge that we are all one, part of a shared existence with one another, in a universe overseen by a force that is beyond our understanding but which binds us ever together.

God disturbs us toward our destiny/by hard events and by freedom's now urgent voice.

So, I rejected my parents' belief in no religion. Off I went to college a few years later with neither net nor blueprint. I took a leap of faith and found Judaism.

Once or twice in a lifetime, a man or woman may choose a radical leaving, having heard Lech lecha – Go forth.

Judaism was there at the sink in the dormitory bathroom while I was brushing my teeth with my Conservative Jewish roommate. And in Rhetoric class as I debated abortion and apartheid with my new modern Orthodox friend. It was there at the Hillel when I began working for Illinipac, the University of Illinois arm of AIPAC that strove to educate students about the logical beauty of Israel.

And it became my home when I joined AEPHi, the historically Jewish sorority which welcomes women of all religions who honor, respect, and appreciate the Jewish faith. Living amongst that group of young women was the first time my dark, curly-haired, assertive, inquisitive self felt like I belonged.

Judaism was there in the history I'd learned, but hadn't considered from a Jewish perspective: it was there in the day's news, understanding current events through the prism of the Jewish experience; it was there in the way my girlfriends' grandparents solicited their views at family dinners they'd invite me to during vacation breaks from school; and it was there when I paid respect at those same friends' loved ones' *shivas*, in the eloquent and thoughtful attention Judaism offers when we lay to rest the deceased.

I majored in English, minored in French, got my Masters in

(*A Leap of Faith continued*)

Secondary Education. But my most important knowledge acquisition was Judaism. One *Shabbat* my sophomore year my friend took me to Hillel to meet her venerated Rabbi. He used to do that, visit all his college-aged congregants at the Big Ten schools. He and I talked a bit. He showed an interest. I appreciated that.

A year later when she and I returned to Hillel to meet hers, and by now my favorite Rabbi, Rabbi Emeritus of BJBE, Mark Shapiro, he extended his hand and said, "I was hoping I would see Kelly Judge."

Ahhhhhh. Community. Belonging to something bigger than myself. It felt good.

And it was extraordinary when senior year, after I'd begun my conversion with Rabbi Shapiro, I met my *b'shert*, the man I would marry and build a life with, coincidentally a congregant from my Rabbi's Congregation, BJBE. **Destiny.**

So, by the time I officially became Jewish, I already had been for quite some time.

But it still hurt to leave. **We don't like leaving.** Because I was, in my actions, even though I wasn't declaring it in so many words, rejecting my family. **A radical leaving.**

We were secular Christians. I could have remained there, but it didn't feel right. It didn't feel like home. Judaism felt like home. However, it still hurt to leave. **We don't like leaving.**

Chosen change is profound. It's a selection of rejecting what is fine, and trying something else. **We don't like leaving / But God loves becoming.**

My parents could not have been more accepting and helpful about my decision: they made a beautiful conversion party for me and many key people in my life were there: my newly adopted Jewish godparents, the principal of the Hebrew school at our congregation, and my soon-to-be in-laws.

My parents threw us a beautiful Jewish wedding, officiated by our beloved Rabbi Shapiro. My parents helped my in-laws during our son Danny's *brit milah*. They proudly attended the naming ceremony when Rabbi Shapiro gave Isabella Rose her Hebrew name, *Penina*.

They cheerfully partook in Mike's and my Jewish rituals; they loved the culture.

Yet it hurt not to be able to share Jewish worship with them. As I made our Jewish home, chose a Jewish preschool for Danny and Bella, continued teaching Sunday School at BJBE, and then became the senior youth group advisor here, I loved our Jewish life.

But, sometimes it made me sad that my family isn't Jewish.

And eventually they grew frustrated, felt left out, rejected by our meaningful Jewish life. While I took this huge leap of faith toward finding my faith, I became aware of a growing new tension. This was an unintended, unimagined consequence of my leap. A negative pressure was building.

Suddenly, we weren't the perfect blended family. "Kelly, why would we come to your house for dinner on Rosh Hashanah? You know we don't believe in religion." *What?*

But, I wanted my whole family at the table. Not just our Jewish family. Ouch.

I learned that even when you leap successfully, there's still the potential for mess beyond the stress, unforeseen problems that might not be so easily managed. I didn't envision that as supportive and open-minded my parents were, there could exist a chasm of belief between us.

Yet taking leaps of faith is the way to resilience of spirit. We expand. And grow. And evolve. But only after we laugh and cry and live. You don't build up those spiritually resilient muscles by playing it safe.

Ours is a Jewish home. Out of respect to our families of origin we've struck our own balance between the secular and the religious, between the cultural and the traditional. What's essential, what's noteworthy, isn't how the leap turned out; it's about what the leap does to us. **God loves becoming.**

Last year I was safely ensconced as a tenured teacher at a nurturing, child-centered, progressive school. Why did I leave that position to take up the mantle of Director of Youth and Family Engagement for BJBE? **Once or twice in a lifetime/a man or a woman may choose/a radical leaving, having heard/Lech lecha – go forth.**

I wasn't looking to disturb the rhythm of our family's well-oiled, ever-moving machine. I was not looking to change up the course of my professional path or my family's life. But I absolutely wanted to become.

Truth is, teaching is not a job, it's who you are. The opportunity to be a leader at BJBE sat with me a full nine months. So when I read *Becoming*, this prayer-poem took my breath away and welled my eyes with tears until a feeling of *shalom* came over me. I knew I was called to go forth. I knew I was called to model radical chutzpah-like decision making to my children. I heard that **now urgent voice which explode and confirm who we are** and I knew my decision had been made.

Decades ago, I leapt into BJBE and found where I belong. My wish is for each of us to take a leap of faith from within to discover that we are already home.

And in my role here at Temple, when I can help you take leaps of your own faith, literally your faith, as you access your Jewish selves, it truly is my blessing. **God loves becoming.**