A Vocal Jewess

By

Robyn Houts
ANTRHO 5
Prof Klein
5/15/2008
Interviews in March 2008 revealed the progression of Merrin Davidson's cultural and spiritual pathway as she has moved from one community to another, and moved from what she termed a mere cultural involvement with Judaism to "converting to her own religion". The expression of her Judaism has varied with the community and with her commitment. In North Glendale, in a mostly Jewish neighborhood, traditions mingled with various Christian relatives, and Merrin sought possible meaning in other friends' spiritual paths. On moving to Modesto, to a non-Jewish neighborhood and school, Merrin and her family became involved in synagogue life, and Merrin's Bat Mitzvah was celebrated. Moving into married life, she has the privilege of a husband who is very supportive of her Judaism and role as a mother and who has converted to Judaism. Merrin is quite open and vocal in the community about her Judaism.

Since the March interviews, I have had the privilege of participating in the Seder of Passover, a ritual celebrated by Jews the world over. We celebrated the 4th Seder on April 23, 2008. My daughter Elizabeth (17yrs) and son Andrew (14yrs) and I, joined Merrin, her husband Kip and sons Benjamin (BJ) and Aiden for the Seder at their house in Gilroy. The following week, Tuesday 4/29, I met Merrin for a follow up 2 ½ hour interview at Mimi's Café at Gilroy Crossing. This is a fairly quiet location, and starting at 11 am. meant that there was a small clientele at that hour of the day.

Hand written notes were once again taken. I did have a tape recorder but it seemed intrusive on what felt more like a personal conversation. I was able to slow Merrin down a couple of times to write some quotes. At the interview, questions centered around clarification of the Seder experience and on the extended family, both in time and
scope, to add context to Merrin's expression of her Judaism relative to the experiences of her family's.

At the Seder, we followed closely *A Family Haggadah II* by Shoshana Silberman[^4], a 1997 Haggadot which has Hebrew, anglicized Hebrew and English texts, including gender-sensitive translation, with discussion questions and commentary on the left-hand side. We had been instructed to arrive for the Passover Seder no later than 6pm since the candles are lit before sunset. Merrin explained the festival, and gave further information throughout the Seder. The text for the Haggadah is over 2,000 years old. Haggadah means the "telling". "Seder" means order. The Passover story dates to the time of slavery of the Hebrew people in Egypt, when the "angel of death" passed over the doors of the Hebrews who had daubed the blood of the sacrificial lamb on their lintels. So there is a "telling" in a special "order" of the story of "Passover".

When we arrived at Merrin's house in Gilroy, the front blinds were uncustomarily open, with the table laid for the Seder visible from the street. We had brought scarves/shawls for Lizzy and myself, Merrin wore a lace head covering, and all the males wore Yamahas, Andrew for the first time. The Seder plate was on the table with Beitzah – long-boiled egg with the shell dyed, Karpas – parsley, Z'roa/Pesach – a large seed substituted for the roasted bone, Charoset – chopped apple and tree nuts, Maror – the bitter herb/horseradish, and Chazeret – second bitter herb/ red-dyed horseradish. Merrin started to read and sing the Hebrew Haggadah. We could follow in the anglicized Hebrew. *Bruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu melech ha'olam asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Yom Tov*. "We praise You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, Who makes us holy by Your mitzvoth and commands us to light the festival
lights”. After a few pages we were all included, being offered to read the English translations. The Seder followed a prescribed order, taking about 3 hours to complete.

KADDESH: Say the Kiddush, then drink the first cup of wine. The 4 cups of wine through the Seder, represent the 4 promises God made to the people of Israel.

UR’CHATZ: Wash hands as the priests did at the temple in Jerusalem.

KARPAS: Dip the parsley in salt water and say the blessing. As a sign of spring I had taken roses from our garden.

YACHATZ: Break the middle Matzah and hide the larger half, the Afikomen There is a prayer for all experiencing poverty, disease, tyranny and violence and a dedication to relieve that suffering. Merrin later hid the Afikomen for the children to find.

MAGGID: Tell the story of Passover; the 4 questions; a drop of wine is spilled, which we did with our fingers, a drop for each plague, the full cup representing the joy at being able to leave 400 years of slavery in Egypt and return to Israel/Canaan; Dayenu; second cup of wine is drunk.

RACHTZAH: Wash hands and say the blessing.

MOAZI/MATZAH: Say the blessings for bread and matzah. Part of the commentary at this point was about a Seder in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp where even there it was said that there are moments of bread (creativity and light) and moments of matzah (suffering and despair).

MAROR: Mix the bitter herb and charoset and say the blessing, a reminder that the ancestors withstood the bitterness of slavery, sweetened with the hope of freedom. We did this by putting both the maror and charoset together on a piece of matzah.
KORECH: Eat a sandwich of matzah and horseradish. (Andrew thought this was the best!)
We now have horseradish in 5 cultural foods – wasabe with our sushi, horseradish with
English style roast beef or steak, American in baked potatoes, with Egyptian food, and
now as maror).
SHULCHAN ORECH: Eat the festival meal. This was garlic chicken, asparagus, green
salad, dry charoset in balls, macaroons and chocolate dipped marshmallows.
TZAFUN: The four children each searched for a piece of the Afikomen, then all ate.
There are various traditions about the Afikomen. This Matzah is the last thing to be eaten,
as a shared offering, to show that we are all responsible for one another.
BARECH: Say the blessing; the third cup of wine is drunk; Elijah the Prophet is
welcomed by opening the door. Traditionally the door is left open for the whole Seder,
but it became unsafe, so now it is left open only briefly or the back door is opened.
HALLEL: Merrin sang the songs of praise, her voice well suited to the minor keys.
NIRTZAH: Complete the Seder by drinking the fourth cup if wine.
Lashanah haba’ah b’Yerushalayim! Next year in Jerusalem!

When Kip arrived home from work around the time of the Kaddesh, he took over
leading the Seder, leaving Merrin to serve the meal. Merrin was called to sing and read
several parts as she can read the Hebrew, and is much more familiar with them than Kip
who was raised as a Southern Baptist. This was a wonderful cultural experience to share
with them, and part of the Passover tradition is to share the Seder. We had been invited
for the first Seder but had been traveling over the weekend and unable to attend. It
seemed that much more special that we were invited to participate in another whole
Seder, being the 4th. We had been graciously included and were privileged to have experienced Passover with Merrin and her family.

At the follow-up interview, looking for more insight into why Merrin's expression of her Judaism varied at the different times and areas of residence, I asked questions about her extended family as well as her core family, growing up. Her great-grandparents had all migrated into the U.S.A. in the late 1800's and very early 1900's from the Ukraine and Austria/Poland to escape the pogroms. Many of these were Socialists, just as Barbara Myerhoff describes in _Number Our Days_. In the case of her grand- and great-grand parents, Merrin says, "...the intellectual parts – if you're busy scraping together a living, get put aside". One family, the Adelmans who came from Polon, Ukraine, were religious, and he was a Cantor, so read Hebrew. The next generation was spread from Montreal, New York and Chicago, to California. The next generation also spread to Toronto and Atlanta. The flow to Montreal started with Merrin's maternal grandfather Abraham Alexander who experienced New York in the early 20th Century, and the "No Jews Need Apply" signs for employment. He became a store manager in Montreal and was able to hire several of the family.

Looking at Merrin's immediate family, her father Gene (Eugene), lost his mother at age 5, in 1945, and Gene was put into the same military school that his older brother attended in Monterey. His father remarried when Gene was 8, and Gene was taken out of the military school and was then exposed to some Jewish culture. Merrin said, "Life events were cultural events – but they were not religious, so my Dad got exposed to Jewish culture at life events and holidays: Birthdays, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Passover and Chanukah. At funerals or bris (circumcision), or baby showers, some sort
of family with Jewish overtone events, you pulled out the challah (braided egg loaf) and the cold cuts – tongue, corn beef, pastramis and chopped liver”.

Gene, a "sensitive child", Merrin said, went through college in Los Angeles and then, in the first induction of Peace Corps, went to the Philippines to teach English. On his return he married Gale Alexander in 1964 and finished his Masters Degree while working various jobs. Merrin's parents are related, through the Pineus Kooba/Kubinsky family. They lived in a predominantly Jewish North Glendale neighborhood and felt no need to belong to the Synagogue. That changed when they moved to Modesto in 1978 where they joined the synagogue for "social" reasons. Being in a community of few Jews, the synagogue provided socialization in a Jewish context. Merrin's parents divorced but are both still involved with the synagogue. Gene remarried, this time to a Catholic. Gene still celebrates Rosh Hosannas and Yom Kippur. For Seder, the tradition for Merrin's family is to celebrate the first Seder at Gale's, her mother, and the second at Gene's, her father.

Merrin described that there is room within Judaism for many different varieties. This is in part because Jewishness is inherited through the mother line, so you are born Jewish by definition. Merrin's East Coast group of relatives, belong to a large temple and are considered "society" Jews. Her uncle Miles is an atheist but his wife Elaine is "religious, reform and societally Jewish", Merrin said, and their children have celebrated Bar and Bat Mitzvah. Her sister Devon is married to a non-Jew but Devon is very Jewish culturally. Her brother Alex had his Bar Mitzvah and later studied International Relations then went to Russia with the Peace Corps. During the time in Russia he became agnostic after having to hide his religion. The KGB "kicked him out" of Russia, Merrin reported,
after his assignment was deemed to be too close to a secret facility. He is married to a "social Christian" and lives in San Francisco.

Within Merrin's own life, the expression of her Jewishness has changed considerably from very little culture in her predominantly Jewish neighborhood in Los Angeles, to a full-blown "conversion" and Bat Mitzvah in the mostly non-Jewish town of Merced, and even a recommendation by the Rabbi that she consider becoming a Cantor. This has changed again as a mother, where the Jewish cultural expectation is that "the mother does the social networking for societal position", said Merrin, and the care and enculturation of the children is the job of the mother.

In Merrin's family in every generation there are examples of the cultural expression of Judaism being interpreted through the circumstances of life. In her great-grandparents generation there were many socialists, a sign of their time in Russia and other parts of Eastern Europe, and yet pogroms drove them from these places. Merrin's grandfather came to live with them in Modesto, and at Merrin's Bat Mitzvah, her grandfather wore his first tallis/prayer shawl. Her grandmother never "lit" candles, and neither did her mother until they lived in Modesto and joined Congregation Beth Shalom and Rabbi Izzy Graudenz. Merrin's brother's experiences in Russia as part of Peace Corps and being "thrown out" of the country by the KGB have affected the expression of his Jewishness. In the larger view, since Jewishness is defined by birth, Jews have come to accept an extremely large range of acceptable culture, from atheist to Hasidic, as well as every color of the rainbow since color genetics mixed in the Diaspora.

Merrin's comfort with her Judaism appears to follow a course parallel to her community, layered with her own search for fulfillment in a spiritual identity. The time
spent in childhood in a very Jewish Los Angeles neighborhood, were years of little formal involvement at the synagogue. This directly contrasts with the time in Modesto, where there was little Jewishness to the neighborhood in which they lived, and a very direct and strong involvement in Jewish life as an active participant in the Synagogue, with Rabbi Izzy Graudenz. This coincided with the time in Merrin's life when she was actively searching for a path of spiritual meaning. Her married life in Gilroy has been fulfillment of those values with the passing of her Jewish culture on to her husband and two sons, associated with patchy involvement at Synagogue. Merrin's life history has provided glimpses of her spiritual path as well as patterns of involvement with her cultural roots.

---

1 Davidson, Merrin (2008, March 6 & 12). Personal interviews (Gilroy, CA).
2 Seder Cultural Event (2008, April 23) (Gilroy, CA).
3 Davidson, Merrin (2008, April 29). Personal Interview (Gilroy, CA)
4 A Family Haggadah II. Silberman, Shoshana Ph.D. Kar-Ben Copies, Rockville 1997
5 Meyerhoff, Barbara Number Our Days. Dutton, New York 1978