



The Hebrew Lesson

by Bettina Elias Siegel

Renee waits patiently while I stare at my workbook. In the past few weeks she's introduced one Hebrew vowel after another—a dizzying array of dots that all look like Braille to me. In fact, if I were trying to read them with my fingertips I'd probably be no worse at it than I am now. Eventually I sound out the letters: "ah . . . may . . . en." "Oh, wait!" I exclaim, recognizing an actual word in the sounds I've just uttered.

"Amen!" Renee smiles at how pleased I am with myself, and I realize I'm acting exactly like my son with his early reader books. And just as I sometimes marvel at the enormity of the task ahead of him—going from sounds to symbols all the way to reading—I sometimes wonder how, at age 42, I'm ever going to master Hebrew.

I've been studying with our synagogue's cantorial intern, Renee, for about three months now. When a friend recently asked me what I hope to accomplish through these lessons, I said casually, "Oh, it's all about the mental stimulation. Just trying to keep Alzheimer's at bay." In truth, though, it's embarrassment that keeps me from admitting the real reason I struggle to learn Hebrew: somewhere in the mass of lines and dots and squiggles that make up the *aleph bet* I think I might be seeking a connection with God.

For the record, God hasn't been on the front burner in my life; He's never even made it into the kitchen. I grew up in a Jewish but purely secular household—no holiday observance, no synagogue attendance, no prayer and no

Bettina Elias Siegel is a former lawyer and a freelance writer.



A JOYFUL MOMENT WITH MY DAUGHTER, LILY, 8, AND SON, ASHER, 6—THE BEST IMPETUS TO GET SOME HANDS-ON IMMERSION IN MY OWN RELIGION.

God. Yet perhaps precisely because I had no religion, the idea of it held a powerful allure. As a child I'd stare at the gold-meuzah-on-a-chain that my grandmother in New York had sent me and speculate about that little piece of paper with the "W" on it rolled up so neatly inside. Eventually my curiosity got the better of me and—religiously observant readers may want to skip the rest of this sentence—I took an open safety pin and pruned the tiny scroll from its container, shredding it to bits in the process. Books with Jewish themes interested me, I had a preteen crush on Ari Ben Canaan in Leon Uris' *Exodus*, and sometimes wore the Star of David necklace my grandmother sent me (she was persistent), but that's about where it ended. It was as though Judaism were an interesting but complex gadget, handed to me at birth with neither batteries nor instruction manual. What exactly was this thing supposed to do? How did you make it work? Missing the answers, I just shlepped it with me from place to place.

It wasn't until I moved to New York as a young adult and attended High Holiday services with my grandparents that I got my first glimpses of what went on inside a synagogue. The proceedings baffled me. Men and women sat separately;

the men prayed fervently while the women openly chatted at an ever-rising volume until silenced—temporarily—by a frightening scowl from the cantor. Everything at the Sephardic synagogue was in either Hebrew or Ladino, and it was unthinkable for the rabbi to mention what page we were on. So I passed the time trying to translate the Ladino in the prayer book with my high school Spanish, amused to find that sometimes God was referred to as "El Señor," almost like "The Big Guy,"

while everyone around me stood up and sat down, mumbled to themselves for long stretches of time, and then inexplicably burst into song at the exact same moment. And through it all my grandmother loudly whispered in my ear a nonstop monologue about who was wearing the nicest hat, and when did I want to get some new suits from my uncle who was in the garment business, and why wouldn't I go on a blind date with that nice young boy who sat across the *bimah* from us, the very same boy she'd tried to sell me on the prior year, and the year before that.

Eventually I did get engaged to a nice Jewish boy (yes, that shout of joy you heard in December 1997 was my grandmother), and yes, we wanted to raise our future children as Jews. But despite having gone through the requisite Hebrew school and a bar mitzvah, my fiancé could not answer many of my questions about Judaism. Recognizing that I would have to take responsibility for my own Jewish education, I enrolled in a nine-month-long Judaism course. Blank slate that I was, it was impossible not to learn something. Still, I was left with the sense that the instruction manual for my Jewish gadget was disappointingly dry and

continued on page 59