

life. In one moment you acknowledge your loss and in the next you move on.

Before I entered Temple Beth El, I'd never learned how to do the second part of the practice—moving on. When really bad things happened for no good reason, I never stopped asking “why?” Even more, I wallowed in “why,” afraid that moving on would mean allowing the terrible thing to happen again. Now, I began to understand that life's disappointments need to have a final resting place, just like the body of the deceased.

Letting go of the bad memories also made room for all the good ones. I'd spent so much time remembering how Aimee died, I almost forgot how wonderfully she'd lived. A travel enthusiast, she never let fear of disappointing her parents stop her from seeing the world. In her mid-twenties she quit her job, gave up her apartment, stored her stuff in her mother's basement, and used all her money to journey around the world with a good friend. About six months into her adventure she emailed me to say the money had run out and they would be getting jobs as ranch hands. Aimee grew up wanting for almost nothing, so the idea of her shoveling horse manure gave me a good laugh. These and other memories have sustained me.

Sometimes during services the rabbi would ask people to openly share their views on religious, political, or social issues. As opinionated as I am, I was too afraid to express my views—afraid that my blackness would really stand out. So I just listened. I noticed that one or two people in the congregation invariably opposed the majority opinion, and sometimes openly disagreed with the rabbi. This kind of dialogue was unlike anything I had ever experienced in church. A minister never asked people's opinions in the middle of a service—and besides, it would be considered rude to openly contradict your minister. Temple Beth El's culture of respectful disagreement fascinated me.

I didn't come to Temple Beth El expecting to convert, but it happened anyway. Although I'd long ago stopped believing in some of Christianity's major tenets, including the necessity of intercession as a means for connecting with God, I just thought it was because I

wasn't religious; it never occurred to me that I just hadn't found the right religion for me. But attending a Reform congregation, with its emphasis on study and questioning and on a direct, personal relationship with God, was helping me cope with life's transitions. After a year of attending services, I met with Rabbi Brickman and said: “I'd like to talk to you about converting.”

As part of the conversion process, I was required to complete an Introduction to Judaism course. During one session, a convert spoke to our class. As one half of an interfaith marriage, he had been attending synagogue for more than ten years before deciding to become a Jew. Talking about the story of Jacob, he said he felt Judaism was really about struggling with God. For the first time, someone expressed in words what I had been feeling for years. Time after time I had wanted things to go “right” in my life and they didn't—and I could not understand why God never lived up to my greatest expectations. Judaism provided a religious environment in which I could openly ask these questions, a religion in which I could express doubt and still be accepted. As a Reform Jew I knew I wouldn't have to check my brain at the door. Instead, it would be my obligation as a Jew to seek to understand God, not only through worship, but also through study, reflection, and questioning.



A year after I told Rabbi Brickman of my intention to convert, I went to the *mikveh* (ritual bath) in preparation for my conversion ceremony four days later. Alternating shades of blue and white ceramic tile covered the walls, floor, and stairs leading into the pool. I submerged myself fully in the warm water three times and recited the blessings; then the rabbis recited their own blessing. Although I've heard that going to the *mikveh* can be emotional, I was not at all tearful. Instead I felt fulfilled. It felt like I was stepping into a part of me that had always been there but was finally being nurtured.

The conversion ceremony that followed on Saturday was wonderful. About 30 people attended, including family, friends, and members of the syn-

agogue. When I was finally called to the *bimah*, I whispered something in Rabbi Brickman's ear. The rabbi then turned to the congregation and said, “Anyone who knows Faithann knows she asks lots of questions. Even now in this final hour she has a question.” My entire family erupted in laughter because ever since childhood I have always loved questions. But today the question was simple. I wanted (and received) permission to address the congregation before leaving the *bimah*. In my short message I spoke about the importance of following one's calling, no matter how difficult that calling may seem.

After the service we all enjoyed wine, challah, bagels, and an assortment of mini cheesecakes, pear tarts, and a large delicious carrot cake. To my surprise I also received some wonderful gifts: a *mezuzah*, a gold Star of David, and two books on Jewish recipes and wisdom.

On that day I thought of the friend who had led me here. Who could have imagined that Aimee's tragedy could change my life so profoundly, and teach me so much about finding joy. □

Letters

continued from page 8

Rabbi Eisenkramer Responds

I share your concern about the ethics of fly fishing. To insure that the fish are returned to the water with a minimum of disturbance I use barbless hooks, wet my hands to protect the trout from oil on my skin, and return the fish to the stream as quickly as possible. Every fish that I release lives to see another day. If every fish caught were kept for food, our streams and lakes would soon be empty. Fishing is not hiking; it is an activity that involves life and death, and connects us to a more primal side of ourselves that we do not often experience in our 21st-century lives. □

Corrections—Winter 2008

In “The Columbus Conundrum,” the date for Tisha B'Av was incorrectly typed as the 7th of Av instead of the 9th.

The editors also wish to acknowledge the research of HUC-JIR rabbinical student Erin Glazer that showcased some of the congregational exemplars in “Action: Confronting the Healthcare Crisis.”