MY JEWISH YEAR

18 HOLIDAYS, ONE WONDERING JEW

ABIGAIL POGREBIN

FOREWORD BY A. J. JACOBS

More Praise For The Books Of Abigail Pogrebin

Stars of David

"Consistently engaging . . . Pogrebin says this book grew out of her efforts to clarify her own Jewish identity. But you don't need to be on such a quest to enjoy the wide range of experiences and feelings recorded here."

—Publishers Weekly

"Pogrebin, a former producer for Charlie Rose and *60 Minutes*, had the tools to push her interviewees beyond their comfort zone."

—Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles

"...a wide and interesting variety of stories about faith and the lack thereof, family memory, ritual, continuity, and the choices they have made."

—The Jewish Week

One and the Same

"An enchanting, fascinating book."

—Lesley Stahl, ***60 Minutes***

"Spot on. An honest explanation of how multiples feel about the relationship into which they were born."

—Newsweek

"One and the Same is a touching, funny, smart book, written with considerable flair. Though it contains medical, social, political, and historical perspectives, it is at its core a book about love and intimacy."

—Andrew Solomon, author of ***Far from the Tree***

"An immensely satisfying, enlightening read."

—BookPage

"This book about what it means to be a duplicate is smart and revealing and wise—and, well, singular."

—The Daily Beast

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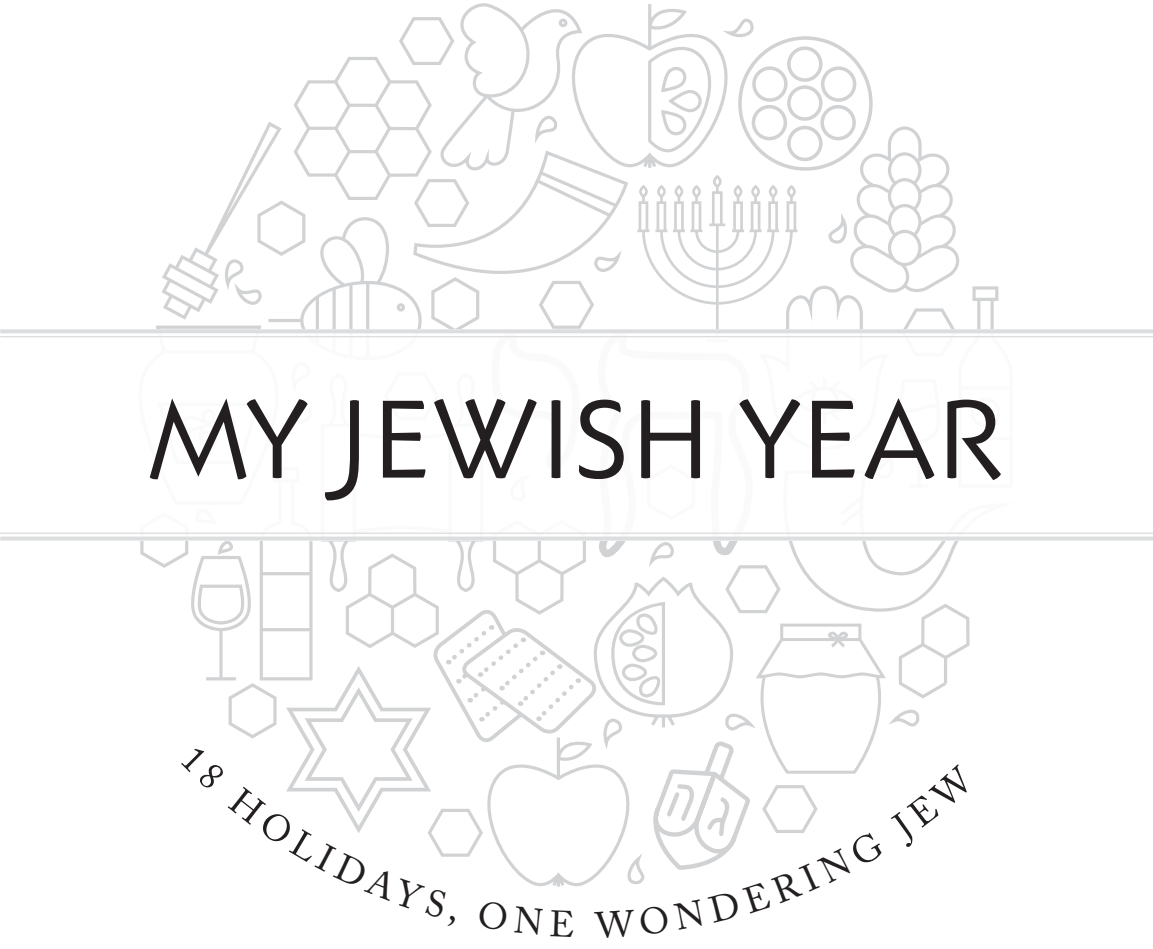

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD

A. J. JACOBS

Abby Pogrebin subtitles her book *18 Holidays, One Wondering Jew.*

Which is an excellent way to describe it.

But let me break her year down a little further for you.

We're talking a year filled with:

- Fifty-one rabbis
- Six days of fasting
- Countless prayers
- One day without deodorant
- A couple of barrels of booze (Shabbat wine and Simchat Torah scotch among them)
- Untold amounts of revelation, joy, and, of course, guilt

In short, a *lot* of Judaism.

We're talking an Ironman triathlon of holiday observance (or so it seems to those of us not brought up Orthodox).

For most of her life, Abby was only loosely connected to her heritage. To borrow a phrase from my own book, Abby was Jewish in the same way the Olive Garden was Italian. Not very. (No offense to the Olive Garden. Great breadsticks.)

But she hungered for a more authentic taste of Judaism.

And this wonderful book is the result.

I'm impressed that Abby finished the year, with all its fasts and feasts, praying and partying. And I'm even more impressed that she produced this book—it's wise, thought-provoking, and funny.

I've known Abby since we were about the age when most of our friends were becoming *bar* or *bat mitzvah*. (Neither of us Olive Garden types went through the ritual ourselves at the time.)

Ever since, I've followed her career with a mix of *naches* (pleasure) and envy. I loved her work as a producer on *60 Minutes*. And her book *Stars of David*, where prominent Jews—from Ruth Bader Ginsburg to Larry King—reflect on their faith. And her book *One and the Same*, about her experience as an identical twin.

But this could be my favorite work Abby has ever done.

She achieves a beautiful balance—in many ways.

She balances passion and skepticism. Learning and memoir.

She balances humor and tragedy—which, as Abby points out, is a very Jewish thing to do. The holidays themselves careen from celebrations to penance and remembrance. As Abby told me, "There's really no stretch of mourning and sadness that's not broken up by revelry. The calendar doesn't let you get too low without some dose of happiness."

She balances the modern impulse to rush around with the ancient imperative to slow down (a huge challenge for a Type A like Abby).

She balances her individuality with the demands of community. Because unlike Netflix, the Jewish calendar does not conform to your own schedule. You don't get to choose when to observe.

And she balances tradition with reinvention. She experiences the Orthodox route, but also experiments with ways to tweak the rituals ("For starters, I plan to add some games and quizzes to keep my kids engaged during Passover. Name the second plague? Frogs!").

Her book has changed the way I look at Jewish rituals, history, and the religion itself. She is a dogged investigator and frank witness. Obscure holidays suddenly made sense; the ones I thought I knew took surprising turns.

A few years ago, I wrote my own book about the Hebrew Scriptures—*The Year of Living Biblically*. Mine was a much different journey. I was trying to follow the written law, the hundreds of rules contained in the Bible itself. (Do not shave the corners of your beard; don't wear clothes made of mixed fibers.)

Abby's journey is very different. She followed both the written and the oral Torah. She took on both the Bible and the thousands of years of commentary and ritual. Her quest is more explicitly Jewish.

And yet I did recognize one common theme in our books: the head-to-toe immersion in a topic.

Before I embarked on my book, I was frankly quite anxious. I was nervous about how it would affect my day job as a magazine editor and my marriage (the beard alone would be a crucible for my wife). I was anxious about the public reaction. I knew it would be easy for detractors to slam my approach as misguided. Would observant folks condemn me as too irreverent? Would atheists slam me for being too gentle on the Bible? Would I be afflicted by boils?

So I went to breakfast with a rabbi friend of mine, Andy Bachman, then head of Brooklyn's Congregation Beth Elohim. And Rabbi Bachman told me a story (which I've written about before; but I figure Judaism is all about the repetition of stories, so maybe you'll forgive me).

The story is a legend from the *Midrash*, and it goes like this: when Moses was fleeing the Egyptians, he arrived at the Red Sea with his thousands of followers. Moses lifted up his staff, hoping for a miracle—but the sea did not part.

The Egyptian soldiers were closing in, and Moses and his followers were stuck at the shore. It was only a matter of time before every one of them would be slaughtered. Naturally, Moses and his followers were panicking. No one knew what to do.

And then, just before the Egyptian army caught up to them, a Hebrew named Nachshon did something unexpected. He simply walked into the Red Sea. He waded up to his ankles, then his knees, then his waist, then his shoulders. And right when the water was about to get up to his nostrils, it happened: the sea parted.

The point, said Rabbi Bachman, is that "sometimes miracles occur only when you jump in."

Thank you, Abby, for jumping in.

Rabbi David Ingber

ON THE JEWISH HOLIDAYS

Contrary to the other three hundred days of the year, when you're running and doing and building and constructing, the Jewish holidays provide a kind of in-built way to pause and to gather yourself and regenerate. . . . Our lives can become so full of activities and to-do tasks that, in some sense, the soul becomes overwhelmed. We need to defragment our souls. We can be pulled in so many different directions, but the holidays help that part of us that needs meaning and connection and great purpose. . . . Holiday rituals are ancient technologies that carry contemporary wisdom. Judaism works.

Rabbi Michael Strassfeld

ON THE HOLIDAYS

Judaism at its best—the ritually Jewish things—are things that help you pay attention. The holidays are not about doing the Jewishly Jewish things—the things that only Jews do. They are about awareness and mindfulness and paying attention. How do you live a life when you're paying attention?

INTRODUCTION

How Did I Get Here?

It was a sure conversation-stopper: "This year I'll be researching, observing, and writing about every single Jewish holiday on the calendar."

My non-Jewish friends nodded politely: "That sounds really *interesting*. . . ."

Non-observant Jews looked puzzled: "Aren't there, like, a *thousand* of those. . . ? I guess you won't be doing much else this year."

Observant Jews shrugged, as if to say, "Welcome to our world; want a trophy?"

I'm exaggerating. Slightly.

But what everyone seemed to be asking was "Why?" and "Why now?"

Why, when my two kids were teenagers and well past their bar and bat mitzvah, when my husband of twenty years was content with our middling observance, when it was kind of late in the game to change the game, did I want to spend the next twelve months steeped in the Jewish calendar, interviewing rabbis about each holiday, reading entire books about one single prayer, attending temple services I didn't know existed, fasting six times instead of once?

All I knew was that something tugged at me, telling me there was more to feel than I'd felt, more to understand than I knew. It's hard to describe feeling full and yet lacking—entirely blessed with family, friendships, and work, and yet annoyed that I hadn't graduated much beyond the survey course when it came to Judaism.

I'm generally leery of "seekers" and the unceasing books about seeking a claim to offer a recipe for joy or insight. But here was a blueprint—thousands of years old—staring me in the face, and I'd never tested it. I'd already been drawn to Jewish life, but I hadn't fully lived one. Judaism's less-mainstream holidays seemed to separate the amateurs from the experts, and though I knew I'd never be fully observant, I also didn't want to be a neophyte forever.

I grew up celebrating Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Hanukkah, two Passover *seders*, and the sporadic Friday Shabbat. But those are a drop in the bucket compared to the total number of holidays that flood the Jewish calendar. I'd watched how observant families adhere to an annual system that organizes and anchors their lives. I envied not their certainty, but their literacy. I wanted to know what they knew. I had a hunch it would take me somewhere deeper.

My Jewish identity had previously been a given, not a pursuit. I lived in a Jewish town (New York City) in a Jewish neighborhood (the Upper West Side) with mostly Jewish friends, none of whom went to synagogue regularly.

My mother, Letty Cottin Pogrebin, had been raised in Queens by a mother who had emigrated from Hungary in cardboard shoes and never had an education, and a father who was a *macher* (big deal) in his synagogue and insisted—not because he was a feminist but because Mom was his third daughter and his only shot at raising "a Jewish boy"—that she receive religious schooling, despite how unusual it was for girls in the 1940s. She was a rare bat mitzvah for 1951.

When my mother was fifteen, her mother died of cancer, a rending loss that was compounded by the fact that she was not permitted to

say Kaddish (the traditional mourner's prayer) for her own mother. My grandfather explained at the time that women didn't count in the necessary *minyan* (quorum of ten) required to recite this prayer. She wasn't "seen" as a Jew at the moment she needed Judaism the most. Stung and disillusioned, she turned her back on institutional practice for two decades. She ultimately came back to Judaism strongly, but my sister, brother, and I fell through the cracks during her estrangement. She didn't sign me up for Hebrew School nor suggest I become bat mitzvah. Feminism was her new religion. (She'd cofounded *Ms.* Magazine with Gloria Steinem and cocreated *Free to Be You and Me* with Marlo Thomas.)

Our Judaism was shaped by Friday night Shabbat candle-lighting when convenient, an epic Hanukkah party to counter the seductions of Christmas, and High Holy Day services twice a year—on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, because Mom still felt she couldn't be anywhere else on those days; their sanctity was in her DNA. When she eventually joined a synagogue again—B'nai Jeshurun on the Upper West Side—she was trying to replace something I'd never known well enough to miss.

My father, Bert Pogrebin, grew up as a "bagel Jew" in a small town in New Jersey. His father, who ran a fruit stand, died when Dad was twenty. His immigrant mom, Esther, one of five sisters, was more lefty than Jew. She wasn't sentimental. Yet Grandma Esther was a loving force in my life, cheering every tiny accomplishment, baking us *ruggelach* (Jewish crescent-shaped pastry), singing us Yiddish lullabies, and *kvetching* that we weren't staying longer the minute we arrived for a visit. My father doesn't believe in God the way Mom does. He loves Jewish discourse, the *Nation* and the *New York Review of Books*, reading every Bellow, Roth, and Malamud. But he isn't much for prayer. They share a love for the New York Philharmonic, new plays, cold vodka, and books. And when it comes to Judaism, they've had an effortless arrangement; Dad accompanies Mom to *shul* on the High Holy Days because she needs to be there and they prefer to do things in tandem. They have taken classes on Torah and Prophets together. But she didn't expect or ask him to pray or feel spiritual

the way she does. She rediscovered faith in a way he couldn't. He never had it in the first place.

Every spring of my childhood, my parents, siblings, and I drove to two Passover seders on my mother's side of the family: the first at my uncle Danny's in Long Island, where, before the service began, my father and I imbibed peanuts from the bar bowl so we wouldn't be starving while we slogged through the Haggadah (the Passover liturgy). The second seder was always at my aunt Betty's in Larchmont, where we inverted the salt shaker into the matzah ball soup so it would have some flavor.

I loved these family seders because of the squeezes of my aunts and uncles, the din of politics competing with "Dayenu" (the central Passover anthem), the Barton's chocolate-covered macaroons. But I would have failed any test on the Exodus story. I was still missing the basics, having no clue that the majority of the Haggadah text isn't found in the Bible (the rabbis wrote it later) or why Moses is barely mentioned in the service despite his role in the Exodus escape (the rabbis wanted to emphasize God, not Moses, as the hero). I could never have explained why we drink four cups of wine (one for every iteration of deliverance in the Exodus text) or why Jews have two seders on consecutive nights, rereciting the same exact Haggadah both times. (The lunar calendar was less conclusive, so Diaspora Jews marked the holiday twice to cover their bases.)

Back in 1976, when I was an unhip eleven-year-old, Mom began taking my twin sister, Robin, and me to yet a third seder, the "Feminist Seder," a ritual that reimagined every segment of the service. It was conceived by four women, including Mom, who were fed up with the patriarch-focused Haggadah and the husband-recite-and-get-served seder meal. Writer Esther Broner created a text and tradition that honored women's sacrifices and the Bible's matriarchs.

I was giggly at the sight of a ceremony on the floor with bedsheets for the table, pillows for seats, and a potluck meal. I soaked up the stories of women's exclusion, centuries up until the present. Year after year, I heard poetic voices of strong women, including Gloria Steinem, whom I knew well from my regular visits to Mom's office at *Ms.*

magazine, and Bella Abzug, the firebrand congresswoman who always wore a wide-brimmed hat, and was the only seder participant to insist on an actual chair.

During the eight days of Hanukkah, my mother pulled out all the stops, set on creating a tradition to rival anyone's Christmas so that her kids would never feel deprived of the national frenzy. Every night, my sister, brother, and I lit the *menorah* and sang "Hanukkah, O Hanukkah" and "I Had a Little Dreidel"—the game in which a spinning top with four Hebrew letters, one on each side, was twirled. In our house, a gift was opened according to whose Hebrew letter landed faceup. The presents were modest (Billy Joel's *The Stranger* was a high point), but the thrill of eight wrapped boxes quickened a child's heart and felt Jewishly correct; we didn't gobble gifts as TV kids do around the Christmas tree. Our trinkets were meted out.

Mom hosted an annual Hanukkah party for about seventy-five people, buying a small present for every guest, asking every family to contribute some form of entertainment: song, poem, or skit. Who can forget Steinem tap-dancing in our living room, or *New York Times* editor Max Frankel delivering a lecture on the Maccabean revolt? My siblings and I wrote new Hanukkah-appropriate lyrics to a medley of Broadway show tunes. From *West Side Story*: *"When you're a Jew, you're a Jew all the way from your first little* bris*, to your bar mitzvah day. . . ."* From *Evita*: *"Don't cry for me, Antiochus . . . the truth is I burned the latkes. . . ."*

I loved these traditions—our crowded living room full of families I'd known forever and our more intimate nightly family powwow around the menorah. But Jewish identity, per se, wasn't at the forefront of my mind until I was twenty-four and it was tested. For a year, I'd been dating a Catholic named Michael who cared a lot about his Catholic heritage. Mom was sure I'd soon abandon the Jewish people and start baptizing my babies. She blamed herself; she'd failed to give me enough Jewish identity to want to preserve it. She cautioned that I'd end up caring later, more than I did in my twenties, a warning that felt unnerving. Despite her sadness, I moved to Palo Alto with Michael when he was admitted to Stanford Law School.

The relationship ended nine months later. In part, I began to feel the fault lines more than I'd expected or that I could explain to him. It wasn't just that when I took him to my aunt Judy's seder in Palo Alto, I realized that everything familiar to me was foreign to him; it was the ineffable gaps that reminded me that we didn't come from the same "stuff." He knew more about his faith than I did about mine, so it was hard for me to visualize our religious future together. How would I teach our children what I didn't know myself? Our conversations on the topic were strained. He thought I was overdramatizing our differences; I thought he wasn't being honest about how hard it could become.

I cried a lot when I packed my bags and flew back to New York, despite my parents' loving welcome. Walking back into my childhood bedroom with its Laura Ashley wallpaper felt like failure; I'd left less than a year ago with fanfare and a certain degree of courage, to strike out on another coast. Now I was home without an apartment or a job. I had also come up against an unfamiliar realization: my Judaism mattered. Or at least, I was being forced to decide whether it did. I could shrug off the question for a while longer, join a gym, schedule dinner with friends, job-hunt. But it would keep circling back, perching on my shoulder like an insistent parrot, *"You have to deal with me."*

Which is not to say that I truly dealt with it until 1997: the moment I was looking at my newborn son at his bris (circumcision). This necessitates a rewind to 1993, when I had a blind date with a wonderful Skokie native named David Shapiro and married him eight months later. I had never felt such an instantaneous certainty about knowing someone without knowing them, of looking forward to talking to someone for the rest of my life. He had a Midwestern genuineness, a keen sense of humor, a fascination with history, and a devotion to family. Our family parallels felt like no coincidence: we both had parents with strong, uncomplicated marriages; I'm an identical twin, and Dave has identical twin sisters. Dave is three years younger than his twin sisters, and Robin and I are three years older than my brother, David. We had an instant shorthand and ease together.

On a sunny October morning, Dave proposed to me at the Lincoln Center fountain, pouring champagne from a bottle into two flutes, playing our favorite song on a portable CD player: "I Could Write a Book," by Rodgers and Hart.

David wanted a small wedding, so we culled the guest list to the bare minimum (not easy—I have regrets), picked a pre-high-season date with lower airfare to St. Lucia, and asked my Yale classmate Mychal Springer, by then an ordained rabbi, to come marry us. We exchanged vows on a mountain so windy, I thought I might blow off. Mom had requested a wedding canopy, and the island resort seemed to enjoy creating its first "hooper," as the St. Lucians referred to it—the *huppah* (canopy for weddings). It was important to me to be under one; all my ancestors had been, and I wanted to relive the *Fiddler on the Roof* wedding scene, having watched every Broadway iteration since 1969, memorized the movie, and played Chava (the rejected daughter) in a college production.

When our first child, Benjamin, arrived in all of his robust nine pounds, twelve ounces, something powerful reared its head as I watched his swaddled self, capped in a miniature *yarmulke*, held aloft by the *mohel* who performed the "surgery," Phil Sherman. (Phil is famously theatrical but he gets the job done fast, with an improvised pacifier of sweet wine for the infant, minimal baby-wailing, and plenty of *shtick*). I'll never forget the questions that echoed in my head as Ben was being blessed: *"Do you really understand why you're doing this? Does this mark the start of your Jewish family, or are you just checking the box?"*

The bris conveyed a decision I'd never made. We scheduled the ceremony because that's what Jews do: host a bris on the eighth day of a boy's birth, invite friends and family to come witness, bless, and then eat. I cried that morning because I was hormonal, true, but also because Ben was the newest tiny Jew, joining a tenacious people that many were determined to eliminate. And I cried at my deficits: how little I knew, and how late I'd have to learn it if I chose to start now.

This was the moment that led me to write my first book, *Stars of David: Prominent Jews Talk About Being Jewish*, an anthology of

face-to-face interviews with Jewish celebrities about whether they cared about Judaism. Sure enough, these public figures had wrestled with similar vacillation—discarding what was inherited; feeling part of a tribe or indifferent to it; owning or abandoning tradition; mastering rituals or never learning them; navigating the patchiness of observance, the shame in stereotypes, the riddle of Israel.

No fewer than sixty-two people agreed to talk to me for the book, including both Jewish Supreme Court justices at the time, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Stephen Breyer; actor Dustin Hoffman; director Steven Spielberg; opera legend Beverly Sills; comedian Gene Wilder; writer and director Nora Ephron; *Star Trek*'s Jewish duo, Leonard Nimoy and William Shatner; Olympic medalist Mark Spitz; and three of my former bosses at *60 Minutes*: Mike Wallace, Morley Safer, and Executive Producer Don Hewitt.

In the midst of what proved to be intense, intimate conversations, I realized that I hadn't answered the questions I was posing: How much does being Jewish matter to you? Do you care what religion your children are? Do you feel a personal weight because of our hard history? Are you pro– or anti–*gefilte fish*?

Then I was jarred by my interview with Leon Wieseltier, the wild-haired, erudite writer, who grew up Orthodox and is fluent in Jewish scholarship. I sought him out because I know he's unapologetically opinionated and I didn't want my hand held. But as we sat on chairs opposite each other in his spare office, the bluntness of his message was still bracing. He was entirely unsympathetic to the idea that I, and many of my interviewees, might be unmoved by, and uncommitted to, Judaism:

"The problem is that most American Jews make their decisions about their Jewish identity knowing nothing or next to nothing about the tradition that they are accepting or rejecting. We have no right to allow our passivity to destroy this tradition that miraculously has made it across two thousand years of hardship right into our laps. I think we have no right to do that. Like it or not, we are stewards of something precious."

I left this interview feeling both depleted and energized. I picked up Wieseltier's book *Kaddish* and underlined a line I've kept with me:

"Do not overthrow the customs that have made it all the way to you." The proverbial lightbulb went off.

I began weekly Torah learning with a young rabbi, Jennifer Krause, who had taught my parents' study group and who hails from Tucson. It soon became a highlight of my week as I began to understand how random Bible stories connected, how family dysfunction was timeless, how right and wrong was clarified in our ancestors' mistakes. Torah references suddenly popped up everywhere: novels, political speeches, movie scripts, poems.

Ultimately Jennifer nudged me to cross the Rubicon—to become a bat mitzvah at the tender age of forty. I fought her at first, because it felt like much ado about not much, and I didn't want to celebrate myself for such a belated milestone. A bat or bar mitzvah (literally: "daughter [bat] or son [bar] of commandment"), typically marked at age twelve or thirteen, is the turning point of a Jew's life—as other religions have their rites of passage—so I was hesitant, twenty-eight years late, to ask friends and family to save the date, to rent out a defunct synagogue since I still didn't belong to one, to reserve a restaurant space for lunch. Jen told me to stop angst-ing; this wasn't about a party, but a promise. I was signing up for Judaism, and that was worth a catered meal.

I gave in and soon found myself on the subway memorizing my *parsha* (Torah section) with earphones every day, pressing stop and rewind to make sure I knew the chant. As the date neared, I became single-minded, going over the prayers and feeling pulled toward the ceremony in some inexorable way.

I slept in my childhood bedroom the night before the service because my Chicago in-laws had kindly flown in and were bunking in our apartment on various sofa beds and mattresses. I suspected that I'd need a little separation and quiet to concentrate. Mom left a gift on my old Laura Ashley comforter: a silver *Kiddush* cup (for wine blessings on Shabbat and holidays) with my name engraved and the date of my bat mitzvah. "Better late," she wrote in her card. "I'm so proud you chose this."

Jen was right: my Big Fat Belated Bat Mitzvah was unforgettable. Maybe it was watching Ben and Molly come up on "stage" to

recite by heart the blessings for the candles and *challah* (braided bread), or seeing them witness their mom officially join the Jewish people. Maybe it was that when I chanted Torah, the handwritten Hebrew letters were no longer swimming on the parchment, but recognizable. Maybe I was overwhelmed by reciting the same text that has been read and read and read by Jew after Jew after Jew for more than three thousand years—even when people had to do so in secret. Maybe it was watching my mother crying in the front row.

My Torah portion in Leviticus included the concept of *Karet*—being cut off from one's people. I realized that I was choosing not to be.

After the bat mitzvah, I became somewhat insatiable, downloading books and journals, listening to recorded sermons of rabbis I admired, reading the Jewish press. I convened a monthly Torah study group over wine in my living room with friends, led by the cheeky, affable Rabbi Burt Visotzky from the Jewish Theological Seminary, an expert on Midrash (Torah commentary). Burt suggested that we begin at the beginning, so we chose the book of Genesis and didn't stop till we'd completed it five years later.

But I was still a Jew without a synagogue, and I didn't look for one because, for all my Jewish awakening, I didn't view temple membership as lacking. Then I stumbled into my first real Jewish home, Central Synagogue, a Reform temple in Manhattan with Moorish Revival architecture, a dazzling rose window, and thousands of devoted congregants.

I happened to attend the bat mitzvah of my friend Pamela's daughter and was drawn in by the splendor of the sanctuary, the urgency of Rabbi Peter Rubinstein's sermon, and the expressive voice of Cantor Angela Buchdahl. It was love at first sound.

Outside, I phoned my husband: "We have to join this place."

Ever the realist, he said, "You spent ninety minutes there."

"I'm just telling you, Dave: *this is where we should be*." I knew I wanted to keep listening to this clergy. I wanted to keep coming back to that room.

I signed us up the following Monday. Dave trusted my gut and went along.

Central draws people in quickly. Suddenly, I was safeguarding Friday evenings to attend services—Central's largest weekly gathering, which numbers hundreds and feels ebullient and sacred. The music penetrated, the spoken prayers felt unforced.

I enrolled my children in the weekly religious school and delighted in watching them bow during their abbreviated *tefilah* (prayer) service and learn Hebrew alongside their new friends. For Ben's "mitzvah project" (community service), he chose to visit regularly with a Holocaust survivor and was affected by his stories.

But then Ben hit a roadblock, when he was saddled by severe anxiety in the seventh grade—a discomfort that was compounded by the loss of his friend Jacob, age ten, to brain cancer. Ben told us that he saw no point in a bar mitzvah or praying to a God who could let a ten-year-old die. I wrote to Senior Rabbi Peter Rubinstein, asking sincerely for help; I had no clue how to parent this moment.

Peter suggested that Ben stop by his office, and one meeting changed everything. Peter managed to connect with Ben in a way that no teacher or therapist had. Over the next few months, Peter talked Ben through his sense of religion's futility. One day, out of the blue, Ben told us he wanted a bar mitzvah after all.

Ben and Molly became bar and bat mitzvah two years apart in ceremonies that seized my heart. During each service, I felt my children uplifted by a ritual that conveyed, *This is about you and also beyond you. None of this lasts without you*. I cried at the same two moments: when the rabbi passed the Torah scroll from the two pairs of grandparents to

Dave and me and then to our child—a physical passing of the tradition—and also when they received a private blessing from the rabbi in front of the ark. I don't say this lightly: it felt as if God was close by that day. Central Synagogue brought home the idea that my mother had predicted years ago: Judaism is a train that circles back to pick you up.

So with all this newfound connection, why did I feel compelled to go further? I think because the more I did grasp, the more I saw what I didn't. It bothered me that I had never lived the entire Jewish calendar. I couldn't explain Shemini Atzeret. I wanted to fill in the gaps, not just asking what Tu B'Shvat means but why it began and its relevance today.

One rabbi, Irwin Kula, posed two questions that guided me throughout my yearlong undertaking: *"What do we hire a holiday to do for us? What is the yearning to which the holiday is a response?"*

I wanted to know what each holiday does. Not that I would sit back, fold my arms, and expect fairy dust; I'd do my part, leave my skepticism at the door, be as active and open as possible. I hoped to be taken somewhere. The land of the holiday-knowers looked compelling, grounding.

Of course, multitudes of Orthodox Jews follow every holiday as a matter of course, but most Jews in the United States are not living by the Jewish clock, nor even aware of what happens when. (The holiday dates change every year according to the Hebrew calendar, which is tied to the moon's cycles and is impossible to memorize; many holidays officially begin at sundown the night before, often lasting more than one day depending on the holiday: Rosh Hashanah is two days; Sukkot is eight or nine, depending on whom you ask.)

I wanted to understand what we non-Orthodox Jews are missing. Not just the facts and figures of Judaism, but their expression in real life. I wanted more of the intensity that I'd observed other people feeling.

The much-dissected Pew Research Center study of 2013 revealed that most Jews do not connect their Jewish identity to Judaism. I wanted to find out if that's because we haven't really looked there.

So I took the leap. I began a column for the *Forward* newspaper, called "18 Holidays; One Wondering Jew," a journey generously shepherded and supported by the *Forward* and then expanded considerably for this book. I promised readers I'd dissect and digest every single Jewish holiday, no matter how obscure, promising to write *before and after* each major one—to share my preparation first, my experience afterwards. (For the less famous holidays, one chapter seemed sufficient.) I aimed to climb the scaffolding of a more rigorous Jewish life without knowing the outcome.

Yes, I could predict all the roadblocks:

1. Judaism's schedule is a bear. I committed to writing about eighteen holidays because when I started counting them, I came up with between eighteen and twenty, depending on how one tallies the major and minor festivals and fasts. I leaned toward a clean eighteen since it's a significant Jewish number: every Hebrew letter has a numerical value and the word *chai* (life) adds up to eighteen. Chai also means "raw" or "uncooked," an apt adjective since I considered myself an unbaked Jew.

2. The Sabbath is considered the most important holiday of all, but I thought I'd lose my audience if I wrote about all fifty-two. I wrote about two, without counting them in the total eighteen.

3. I like eating. The idea of graduating from one difficult fast (Yom Kippur) to six didn't electrify me.

4. Synagogue services are typically long, and, let's be frank, not always riveting. I decided to research and visit different temples and independent prayer groups across denominations, which would mean significant pew time.

5. My kids and husband didn't sign on for this. Now, not only did they have to participate (at least a little), but they'd have to hear about it (a lot). They said that they were game, but I wasn't so sure. I apologized in advance because I'd be absent at odd times (one penitential service, Selichot, began at midnight; on Shavuot [the giving of the Torah], people study all night till sunrise).

6. I apologized to my Central clergy because I'd be peripatetic for a year. I apologized to my husband because I'd be running off to spend hours without him, sitting in other shuls on the High Holy Days when we normally sit side by side.

7. I realized my method might appear quirky or hypocritical: I would be observing Jewish holidays without being observant, eating ritual foods without keeping kosher, designing a personal seminary without getting a degree. This would be an expedition, not a conversion. *I* was clear, but others might not be.

8. I worried that I'd be perceived by the Orthodox as a tourist or trespasser in what adds up to their way of life. Even though, even in Orthodoxy, there is no *one way*. I've met observant Jews who don't keep every fast, who parse kosher rules very personally, who discard one rite but wouldn't skip another. Judaism has become highly customized, and the labels of Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative, and Orthodox are all moving targets.

9. My Hebrew is pathetic. I first learned the language in college (taught by a dynamic professor who used the Israeli Top-40 pop countdown to drill vocabulary), then promptly

forgot everything I'd mastered because I stopped using it, then relearned enough to chant my Torah portion, then recently went on Craigslist to find a tutor and found Joel Goldman, a very sage, very Orthodox instructor who looks anxious for the Jewish future every time I read aloud.

10. Okay, *The Year of Living Biblically* by A. J. Jacobs was a brilliant book. I went to high school with A.J., I know A.J., A.J. is a friend of mine. But he and I agreed that my voyage would be different—A.J. followed the Bible's scriptures, I'd be the holiday pilgrim. He gave me his blessing. And he kindly wrote the Foreword to this book. So everyone can stop bringing up A.J. already.

I noted the hurdles and then pressed ahead:

I printed out a Jewish calendar and taped it to my fridge.

I ordered a *shofar* (ram's horn) on Amazon.com. (FYI, they can be malodorous.)

I picked out white clothes for Yom Kippur. (We're supposed to dress in the white of our burial shroud.)

I polished my candlesticks and found a recipe for *hamantaschen* (the Purim pastry).

I researched a place to go for Selichot (penitence before the High Holy Days—who knew we atone before we atone?) and a place to observe Yom HaShoah (Holocaust remembrance). I was drawn to places where a holiday would be highlighted; not all synagogues program every holiday.

"Most American Jews don't see identity as an enterprise of labor, a matter of toil," Wieseltier told me. "So in America now it is possible

to be a Jew with a Jewish identity that one can defend, and that gives one pleasure—and for that identity to have painfully little Jewish substance." I wanted my Jewish identity to have Jewish substance. I wanted more "toil." Wieseltier's prescription for Jewish meaning—a resonance I craved—was to "get into the fight." It was time.

First stop: Rosh Hashanah.

Rabbi Michael Strassfeld

ON ROSH HASHANAH

Rosh Hashanah is about possibilities and births, new beginnings. In some ways that's the potential of cyclical time. You think you're just a year older, but you can start again.

Jonathan Blake

ON ROSH HASHANAH

It's like you're on cruise control, mindlessly going down the highway, when suddenly you're confronted with lights and sirens and you have to think fast and take control of the pedals or you're going to end up part of the emergency situation up ahead.

That's Rosh Hashanah to me: Yes, it's a sweet time, a time for apples and honey, but even more it's alarm-clock time: the piercing wail of the shofar that shakes us out of the stupor of the daily routine. We understandably crave comfort and convenience: the chaos of the world around us practically demands that we insulate ourselves with regimen and regularity. Rosh Hashanah bolts us awake. It says: "Life doesn't have to be like this." You can change. Your hurting relationships can be better. Your unfounded anxieties and petty fixations need not strangle you forever in their grip. Your accumulated, tough scar tissue need not keep you from feeling. Your life holds possibilities—beautiful opportunities—some of which you've falsely assumed out of your reach, some of which you haven't even dared to dream up. That's Rosh Hashanah to me, a blast of the possible.

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PREPPING ROSH HASHANAH

Self-Flagellation in Summer

9.22.14

The instruction manual from the Israeli company that shipped my shofar (the trumpet made from a ram's horn, blasted during the Jewish New Year) says the blowing technique can be learned by "filling your mouth with water. You then make a small opening at the right side of your mouth, and blow out the water with a strong pressure. You must practice this again and again until you can blow the water about four feet away."

Rosh Hashanah (literally "head of the year") marks the Jewish new year, the anniversary of Creation, and requires the shofar blast to alert the world to the new beginning—the moment we're supposed to "wake up" to who we've been in the last year and who we aim to become in the next one. The horn is notoriously impossible to blow, especially with its prescribed cadence and strength. Try it some time: it's really hard. Synagogues troll for the brave souls who can actually pull it off without making the congregation cringe at the sad attempts that emit tense toots or dying wails.

This year, I'm committed to fulfilling the commandment of hearing the shofar blast not only on the new year itself, but on nearly every morning of the Hebrew month of Elul, the weeks of self-examination

that begin before Rosh Hashanah and end on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement).

So I'm standing at the kitchen sink, spewing tap water ineptly as my children look at me askance. My seventeen-year-old son, Ben, picks up the tawny plastic horn. "Let me try."

He kills it.

I hit on an idea. "I need you to be my blower every morning for the next thirty days."

"Sure," Ben answers blithely, despite the fact that he can't be roused before noon during the summer.

Before this project, I didn't know that the shofar gets blown daily for thirty days before the Jewish new year. (It's actually fewer, because the horn can't be honked on Shabbat nor the day before Rosh Hashanah.) Elul is the month prior to Rosh Hashanah and leads into the Days of Awe—the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Elul begins a forty-day period of repentance, judgment, and forgiveness. These forty days recall the weeks that Moses prayed for God's forgiveness on behalf of the Israelites who had sinned by building a forbidden idol—a golden calf. During this period of Elul, we ask forgiveness for that first, faithless idolatry and for our countless modern missteps.

This is new to me: starting the path to repentance in August's eighty-degree weather. I'd previously thought that self-abnegation was a one-day affair—the Yom Kippur Cleanse. And that was plenty; twelve hours in synagogue without eating has always felt to me like ample penitence. But now I'm learning a new rhythm. Contrition starts daily, early, forty days before the mother lode, spurred nearly every morning by a noise one can't ignore.

It's immediately obvious that there's no way I'm rousing Ben to blow the shofar for me. He's on Teenager Time. I'm on my own. The first day, I pick up the plastic trumpet and go into a room as far from my sleeping family as possible. I lift the horn to my mouth and try to follow the contradictory directions to simultaneously relax and purse the lips, whistling air into the mouthpiece. To my shock, out comes a blast. It's not pretty, but it's hardy. I keep my gaze out the window, thinking

how bizarre this is and, at the same time, how visceral. The sound of the shofar is Judaism to me: raw, rousing, plaintive, adamant. I blow one more time, a little tentatively, because I don't want to disturb the house. I then sit down on the sofa to Google the twenty-seventh Psalm on my iPhone because I learned we're supposed to recite it aloud every morning from the first day of Elul until the end of Sukkot, the holiday that follows Yom Kippur. That's a lot of one psalm.

The verses are about God's protection, which we're going to need—Elul reminds us—during the upcoming days of judgment. I hear my voice saying the words, and they're oddly comforting—despite the motif of dread.

> The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom should I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?
>
> . . .
>
> Though a host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war should rise up against me, even then will I be confident.

I then attempt the entire psalm in Hebrew, and manage to get through it. Slowly. But I'm proud of the fact that I can, in no small part thanks to Joel Goldman, my no-nonsense Hebrew tutor.

When my kids wake up, they inquire about my shofar debut. I tell them it felt poignant and pointless at the same time; I felt connected to something ancient, and yet foolish, standing in my pajamas, spitting through an ersatz ram's horn. Ben apologizes profusely for failing his assignment on the first day. I reassure him that I should be the one shouldering this ritual anyway; it's my Wondering Year, my obligation.

As the Elul days accumulate and become routine, I find myself actually looking forward to the new morning regimen—waking up ahead of my husband; turning on the coffee machine; grabbing my shofar and facing the window. My bleats are sometimes so solid, they surprise me, but more often they're jerky. I have to balance my desire to practice against alienating my family. "Cut the shofar!" my husband shouts from the next room.

The Medieval philosopher Maimonides described the blowing custom as "a wake-up call to sleepers, designed to rouse us from our complacency." It forces me to ask myself: "Am I complacent?" About my behavior, my friendships, my parenting, my work? If complacency means, as the dictionary says, "a feeling of smug or uncritical satisfaction with oneself," the answer is actually no. Just ask my therapist. I offer her a weekly catalogue of self-reproach. But the fact is, I don't scrutinize myself as comprehensively as I could when it comes to my character. Really, really truthfully: What kind of person am I, and how do I assess my pettiness, apathy, self-interest? The shofar should derail our rationalizations.

Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, author of one of the classic guides to the holidays, *The Jewish Way*, explains that Elul is a time for "accounting for the soul," or *cheshbon hanefesh* (a reckoning with one's self). Yitz, eighty-two, a friend of my parents (which is why I call him Yitz), who is tall, slim, and somehow ethereal in his erudition, radiates placidity. If I could spend more time with Yitz, I'm convinced I'd be calmer, not to mention smarter. "Just as the month before the summer is the time when Americans go on crash diets, fearing how their bodies will look on the beach," he writes in his book, "so Elul, the month before Rosh Hashanah, became the time when Jews went on crash spiritual regimens, fearing how their souls would look when they stood naked before God."

I ask some other trusted rabbis how they'd suggest going about this nakedness, this "accounting for the soul." They recommend choosing one trait a day and examining that one quality. In an attempt to find a list of traits, I Google "Elul exercises" and "Elul practices" and come up with a list of *middot* (traits or measurements) that will take me through all forty days. It's an alphabetical litany of optional characteristics suggested by a Toronto teacher named Modya Silver on his blog (since taken down):

Choose one of these 40 traits for each day of Elul:

- Abstinence—*prishut*
- Alacrity/Zeal—*zerizut*
- Arrogance—*azut*
- Anger—*ka'as*
- Awe of G-d—*yirat hashem*
- Compassion—*rachamim*
- Courage—*ometz lev*

- Cruelty—*achzariut*
- Decisiveness—*paskanut*
- Envy—*kina*
- Equanimity—*menuchat hanefesh*
- Faith in G-d—*emunah*
- Forgiveness—*slicha*
- Generosity—*nedivut*
- Gratitude—*hoda'ah*
- Greed—*taavat betza*
- Hatred—*sina*
- Honor—*kavod*
- Humility—*anivut*
- Joy—*simcha*
- Laziness—*atzlut*
- Leadership—*hanhagah*
- Life force—*chiyut*
- Love—*ahava*
- Loving kindness—*chesed*
- Miserliness—*tza'yekanut*
- Modesty—*tzniut*
- Order—*seder*
- Patience—*sav'lanut*
- Presence—*hineni*
- Pride—*ga'ava*
- Regret—*charata*
- Recognizing good—*hakarat hatov*
- Repentance—*teshuva*
- Respect—*kavod*
- Restraint—*hitapkut*
- Righteousness—*tzedek*
- Shame—*busha*
- Silence—*shtika*
- Simplicity—*histapkut*
- Slander—*lashon hara*
- Strength—*gevurah*
- Truth—*emet*
- Trust in G-d—*bitachon*
- Watchfulness—*zehirut*
- Wealth—*osher*
- Willingness—*ratzon*
- Worry—*de'aga*
- Fear/awe—*yirah*

I print out the list and think about who will tackle it with me. My rabbi-guides told me to find a *chevruta* (study partner) to keep me on track and ensure a daily review. So I need someone who's going to be game and won't balk at the discipline, let alone the candor. My close friend Dr. Catherine Birndorf is the ideal candidate: an accomplished psychiatrist and a fellow stumbling Jew, her bracing directness and humor keep me on my toes. Over our staple breakfast of soft-boiled eggs and toast, she relishes excavating our obsessions and personal roadblocks. She's helped me through more false-alarm crises than I want to name. I describe my proposal to her in our favorite diner, and Catherine doesn't hesitate before saying yes, which makes me feel grateful because I didn't really have a Plan B. It's a lot to ask

of someone—to do one penance per day—swapping confessions. Not everyone has the patience or the curiosity.

Our agreed protocol is this: we'll mull the trait-of-the-day to ourselves privately during daylight hours, then, at night, email each other frank reflections. To give Catherine some context for this Elul assignment, I send Yitz's quote to her—the one about "crash diets" in anticipation of the beach. She writes back: "I'm a little skeptical of the beach analogy and crash dieting since it rarely leads to lasting change. But you gotta' start somewhere. . . ."

Rabbi Burt Visotzky, a jocund expert in Midrash (rabbinic commentary on Torah) who happens to be another family friend (so I'll call him Burt) and has taught for more than thirty years at the Jewish Theological Seminary, tells me that daily scrutiny is necessary to upend our complacency. "When you go to the therapist, you don't just go once," Burt reminds me. "You keep going. The repetition of Elul allows you to open yourself—not all at once—to things you've closed off."

What have I closed off? The realization that I still haven't managed to turn compassion into action often enough. I spent a semester teaching memoir-writing to formerly incarcerated men (a powerful experience), but failed to find a way to stay in touch with them. I don't see my parents enough. My aunt and I haven't recovered from a rift four years ago. I still look at my phone too much in restaurants, though I hate when others do that. I tend to remind my son what he needs to finish, instead of just asking how he is.

I see the point of Elul, the necessary runway to spiritual liftoff. How can one start the new year without looking fully—exhaustively—at the one that came before? When else do we permit ourselves, or demand, a detailed self-analysis?

I ask Burt—in his book-filled office—how he'd respond to those who say forty days of navel-gazing is overkill before Yom Kippur. "You can't walk into synagogue cold," Burt fires back. "Let me use the shrink analogy again: you don't just go into your therapy session without thinking ahead to what you want to discuss." No one knows that better than Catherine, a therapist by profession.

We dive in. And the middot force me to zero in on pockets of myself I rarely turn inside out.

Anger: I get riled when I feel something is unjust. I need to pause before writing the curt email.

Courage: I both have it and lack it, and wish I had the guts to worry a little less about gaining consensus before doing what I think is right.

Cruelty: I don't believe I'm ever mean, at least not consciously.

Forgiveness: I don't forgive my own mistakes. I'm slow to forget affronts. I beat myself up for being poor at things I could have studied harder: cooking, Hebrew, golf.

The imperfections go on. About two weeks into my middot list, I'm preparing dinner on a Saturday night with my mother-in-law, Phyllis, who is visiting us with my father-in-law, Milton, from Chicago. Every time she asks me how my holiday-immersion is going, she poses the same question: "Do you think you're going to turn really religious?"

I'm chopping cucumbers as I try to explain that I have no plan other than to simply keep up with the calendar and see where it takes me. One thing at a time. For now, I just need to focus on the Elul reflections. Phyllis doesn't hide her skepticism: "Don't you think it's going to be hard spending forty days tearing yourself apart?" My answer surprises me. I tell Phyllis that the task is already giving me a strange stillness. Contrary to Yom Kippur, when my penance in synagogue is often sidetracked by hunger, it's a very different experience to critique oneself on a full stomach while moving through an average day. I'm less impatient with the exercise; I take my time. I might even be harsher on my flaws because, unlike in services, when the litany of sins comes fast and furious, Elul allows for a scrupulous accounting.

My nightly exchanges with Catherine become trinkets of candor, which I collect. We make our way through the list as summer folds into fall, and I find that the specificity of the list makes self-examination sharper, plainer. There's less room to skirt the truth.

And yet despite all the introspection, I'm wholly at sea when it comes to the next phase of the atonement marathon—*Selichot* (penitential prayers). We beg for mercy. Selichot starts the Saturday night before

Rosh Hashanah and lasts until Yom Kippur. The kickoff service is like going to the late show, scheduled between 10 P.M. and midnight—and includes poetry of contrition.

I learn that the centerpiece of the Selichot liturgy is the "Thirteen Attributes of Mercy." They are God's virtues—which, if recited, are our ticket to clemency.

The Israelites were given this list after they angered God by building the Golden Calf. According to the Talmud (commentary on the Torah), God basically told Moses: "If your people want me to forgive them, they should recite this list describing me."

I'll input the numbers—though they're not usually in the text—because otherwise you may be as confused as I was as to how one gets to thirteen traits:

> 1. Merciful God, 2. merciful God, 3. powerful God, 4. compassionate and 5. gracious, 6. slow to anger, and 7. abundant in kindness and 8. truth. 9. Preserver of kindness for thousands of generations, 10. forgiver of iniquity, 11. willful sin and 12. error, and 13. Who cleanses (Exodus 34:6–7).

Okay. I get the Thirteen Attributes of God . . . kind of. Truthfully, it seems oddly insecure of God to require thirteen compliments in exchange for mercy. But as I reread the prayer, I start to absorb a different message. Maybe God is saying, "These attributes of mine should also be yours. Emulate and live by them."

When I read the prayer that way, I love the list. They are traits I aspire to, even if I never thought to enumerate them. Ben Franklin did just that. He created a list of thirteen virtues and measured himself by them every week, including temperance, silence, frugality, and industry. Our Founding Father fashioned his own personalized Selichot.

Despite my epiphany about God and Ben Franklin, I'm not so keen on going to synagogue so late on a weekend night. But I've committed to push through my laziness, my excuses (and my comfort zone) to keep up and show up. Judaism has specific office hours.

I've picked a program that starts before midnight, because I'm a wimp about staying up late. I walk into the dignified Park Avenue Synagogue on Madison Avenue at 10 P.M. and feel like a party guest who's arrived too early. It's not crowded, not empty. This sanctuary always has a formality to it, but tonight there's extra pomp: the velvet-swathed Torah is adorned in pristine white garb for the impending High Holidays, like a child putting on a new birthday outfit. The music is majestic. Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove, whom I know and admire, is lacking his usual wry humor. Tonight is serious stuff.

May my heart be open
To every broken soul,
To orphaned life,
To every stumbler
Wandering unknown
And groping in the shadow.

I'm the stumbler, the wanderer, the groper in the shadow. That's why I started this project. I now realize it's a quintessential Jewish act: seeking, grappling. If you're reaching, it's because you believe there's something to grab hold of.

I can't stay till the end because I promised my friend Rabbi Elie Kaunfer I'd stop by his service way uptown. Cofounder of Mechon Hadar, an independent seminary, Elie taught my Torah study group and wrote me this email before the holiday: "Abby, You might like a more experiential *davening* (reciting prayers), even if you aren't able to understand or even follow every word."

I arrive late to the crowded room of young regulars on the second floor of the Fort Tryon Jewish Center in Washington Heights. They have run out of handouts and chairs, so I move to a corner of the dimly lit space, grab my iPhone, and quickly download the Selichot text Elie had sent me in advance. I steal a glance at the worshippers

around me, making sure I'm not the only one relying on a handheld device. I'm not; this is the Y Generation. I manage to find where they are on the page, but can barely keep up, especially in the bad light.

It's clear, however, that no one cares what his or her neighbor is doing. When singing the *niggunim* (melodies without words), the full-throated, harmonizing voices somehow lift me up and carry me along. Elie's email comes back to me: "Prayer is not about a cognitive experience of the words."

Whenever we get to the "Thirteen Attributes of God"—which has a melody I somehow absorbed in Central's services—I can sing with the room, and that changes everything.

> Adonai! Adonai! El rachum v'chanun / Erech apayim v'rav chesed ve-emet / Notzer chesed la-alafim / Nosey avon vafesha v'chata'ah v'nakeh!

It's revealing to watch Elie in this context and realize that a ritual like Selichot, with its raw pleading, can bring out someone's primal side. Usually a measured, scholarly presence, Elie is bowed in fervid prayer, his head tented with a tallis, his voice—more powerful than I knew it could be—rising and falling, driving the worship as if overtaken by some divine engine. I wish I could be that transported.

Each time we get to the Thirteen Attributes, the song gains in volume. We plead as one. *Hear me. Forgive me. Grant me another year.* It echoes the twenty-seventh Psalm I've been reciting daily. It could feel useless to repeat—day after day—verses that may (or may not) have been penned by King David. But just like the recurrent sound of the shofar each dawn, just like the recurrence of the Thirteen Attributes, I'm beginning to grasp the resonance in repetition. Each reprise offers another chance at meaning.

> "Do not hide your face from me. . . . Do not forsake me, do not abandon me"—Psalm 27.

And repeat.

Rabbi Joanna Samuels

ON ROSH HASHANAH

"Today the world is born," we proclaim on Rosh Hashanah. A provocative Midrash teaches that Rosh Hashanah is not the anniversary of the *first* day of creation, but instead the *sixth* day of creation. On one long sixth day, God created Adam and Eve, who, in turn, loved, disobeyed, were banished from paradise, and learned that they would, eventually, die.

It is this sixth day that is the churning expanse of my *yoma arichta*—the "long day" that the sages called the two days of this holiday. I am intensely present to the miracle of being alive and yet frighteningly awake to the dark reality of mortality. I am optimistic that a new year could bring renewal to my soul and yet I confront my stubborn habits and long-standing failures. I am aware that I can—I must!—marshal my abilities in the service of making our world more just, and yet I am overwhelmed by how much seems unfixable.

Each and every Rosh Hashanah, as I seesaw from gratitude to fear, from possibility to narrowness, I consider the *yoma arichta* of Jewish history, the continuous narrative of a people, diverse and divergent, balancing on the same axis of optimism and fear. In the merit of all those whose lives make up the long years of our presence on earth, I commit to see possibility, to seek out repair, and to embrace the miracle of creation.