

A JEW IN NAVAJO COUNTRY: A JOURNEY OF FAITH

By Debra Goldberg

The mountainous back road leading to the sheep ranch of Sara and Ted Yazzie on Navajo tribal land near Chinle, Arizona, was not much more than a wide dirt path. I glanced up at the cloudless morning sky; the deep blue brought to mind the *techeilet*. What would my composition students at Yeshiva University think if they could see me navigate this world that was so different from the classrooms of Belfer Hall? My backpack, normally stuffed with composition essays and homework assignments, was filled with water bottles and outdoor weather gear. There was a dusty map of Arizona and New Mexico clipped to my window visor. My traveling companions, a volume of Tehillim and an ArtScroll prayer book, were propped up against the back of the green passenger seat.



EN ROUTE TO CHINLE

I had flown to New Mexico primarily on business to finalize the details of a film shoot scheduled for later that summer. I had also received an invitation from a Navajo friend, Marilyn Yazzi, to join her at her parents' traditional home on reservation land in Chinle for the celebration of her oldest daughter's graduation from college. I was happy to be invited and eager to attend, but I also felt a little uneasy. It was hard to keep up with my religious obligations with more than two thousand miles between me and the kosher marketplaces and synagogues of New York City's Upper West Side. Also, I was feeling an internal crisis brewing about my observance level and I was experiencing doubts about the depth of my commitment.

Part of the problem was the lack of support I craved from some family members and friends. I come from a close-knit family and since I am a single woman in mid-life, I think of my friends as an extended family. For the most part, however, they were cordial but disinterested in Judaism. A few were hostile and angry—one friend, a prominent attorney who was at an earlier time active in Jewish political affairs, became nearly apoplectic when I confessed I was spending my weekends in Brooklyn

observing Shabbat. He demanded to know what was so wrong with my life that I decided to join "a Jewish cult."

Even worse, I had no ready answer that would make sense to him. I seemed unable to put into words what I felt in my heart. This realization troubled me so much that it began to endanger my commitment. Why wasn't my Conservative upbringing *enough*? Why turn myself upside down to meet a number of religious obligations that called for significant changes in lifestyle, many of which were painful and difficult? Was my interest in Orthodoxy a sentimental connection that would wear off in time, eventually returning me to the dissatisfying place from which I had departed?

That question was on my mind as I drove to the Navajo reservation. How was I to know then that it was this very trip to Chinle and an encounter I would have there with a Native American medicine man that would turn my religious crisis into a spiritual transformation that renewed and reinvigorated my commitment to become a more observant Jew?

For most of my professional life, I produced broadcast television and video programming. In recent years, I had produced a series of programs about Native Americans on tribal lands throughout the lower forty-eight states and Alaska. It was a challenging assignment and a fascinating and enlightening experience. I particularly enjoyed my friendships with those traditional Native Americans who had managed to preserve and practice the traditional reli-

gious customs and ceremonies handed down to them by the generations that lived prior to European presence in North America.

Native American tribes are often misrepresented in the press as a single population group, but each tribe is a sovereign and unique people with its own culture and religious traditions. The Navajo Tribe, the largest tribal group living in the United States today, is arguably the tribe that has remained the most culturally intact after the mass slaughter of Native Americans that took place from the late sixteenth to the end of the nineteenth century.

The truth was that among my Navajo friends I felt very much at home. Yet, I argued with myself that if I was starting to doubt my religious commitment I should return at once to New York to shore it up: put a fence around it like the fences the great sages put around the Torah. There were signs that without such a fence my religious practice would start to erode. The previous Shabbat I had chosen to stay in my hotel room rather than join a Chabad dinner or travel to Albuquerque where there was an Orthodox shul. The isolation provoked more doubt.

My anxiety increased as I drove to Chinle. I tried to make a cell phone call to my host, but there was no coverage in the mountain pass. Everything seemed to spook me. The tires kicked up pebbles from the dirt road, and as they struck the bottom of the car I thought of hailstones falling upwards from a cloudburst beneath the earth. I

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suffered pangs of unanticipated homesickness. There were moments I felt lost even though a lead car had been sent to take me to the Yazzi home.

AMONG MY NAVAJO FRIENDS

The Navajo reservation is vast, roughly the size of West Virginia. It occupies northeastern Arizona and reaches into Utah and New Mexico. Tribal members commonly known as Navajo traditionally call themselves *diné*, which is translated as “people” or “the people.”

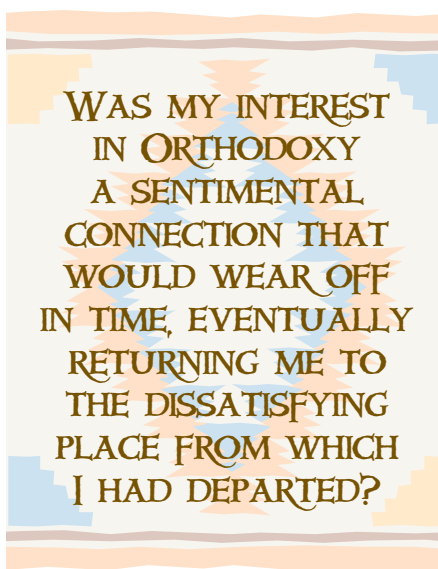
Navajo lives are often difficult. Many people are poor, and there are few support services in the outlying areas. The reservation near Chinle is situated on sun-baked land dotted with sheep ranches, modern homes and traditional ceremonial hogans. Valleys are backed by rocky outcroppings and mountains. In some areas, you can scan the horizon in all four directions and feel as if you are driving on the broad flat back of the earth. Without the distractions of an urban environment, I quickly realized the smallness of my presence in relation to the natural world.

When I finally arrived at the sheep ranch, Marilyn’s large family greeted me warmly. I sat down at the kitchen table where Sara, Marilyn’s mother, a welcoming, intelligent and engaging woman, was cooking and chatting with her guests. Marilyn’s nephew was making Navajo fry bread on the porch, the delicious aroma filling the two-bedroom house. The house was situated on land containing several structures for the ranch as well as an eight-sided “female” hogan, traditionally under the domain of the women members of the family. Meals and other daily life events often take place in the hogan.

The sheep and a llama seemed to ignore us as we entered the hogan. (Later that evening I bottle-fed a nervous young lamb, and let me tell you that it’s not as easy as it’s made out to be on the Disney Channel.) Inside, people were already gathering, and large plat-

ters of fruit, vegetables and hot dishes were set before them.

It was at this point in my visit that I learned that Ted, Marilyn’s father, was a respected Native American medicine man. I was not surprised that she hadn’t mentioned it to me before; Navajo customs and traditions place a high value on modesty and humility, so there would have been no reason for her to mention her father’s esteemed position prior to my visit.



Medicine men are the traditional healers of Native American tribes. The Navajo religion is reflected in every aspect of their existence. It is generally understood that the emphasis of their religion is placed on harmony and balance through a complex ceremonial system that details man’s relationship with the creation of the earth, of the sky and of humanity. In Jewish terms, it would be as if our rabbis were also doctors who engaged in medical healing as a core component of their religious training and spiritual service.

The relationship between Jews and Native Americans is not new—the belief that Native Americans were descendents of the Lost Tribes of Israel was popular among some of the nation’s Founding Fathers (William Penn among them), and was researched by such luminaries as Thomas Jefferson. In more recent

times, Jews and Native Americans mingled in the early trading posts of the southwest. According to an article posted on the American Jewish Historical Society web site, for a short time there was even a Jewish tribal governor, Solomon Bibo, who was born in Prussia in 1853. Although many Native Americans I have met have not interacted with Jewish people in a significant fashion, they know about the Holocaust and are quick to extend their sympathy and understanding. (That is in stunning contrast to the number of anti-Semitic incidents involving white people I have been subjected to during film shoots in rural regions of the country.)

Native Americans suffered as well. After the destruction brought about by the US government-mandated slaughter of tribal groups, Christian missionaries and government agents tried to eradicate what was left of Native American culture. These intentional efforts to destroy their culture are well documented by photographs, oral accounts and written records. I have been told stories of forced conversions. Children were shipped to “Indian schools,” where they were tortured and beaten and forbidden to speak their Native languages; with the death of language came the death of their cultures.

ALONE IN MY GROWING FAITH

When my Native American friends discussed their own history and culture, they would sometimes ask me questions about my Jewish faith. Prior to my intensive immersion in the *shmirim* of the Upper West Side, I didn’t have a lot to offer. My early religious orientation was mired in contradiction. I was raised in the Conservative practices of my parents, who were proud Jews and supporters of Israel; however, my grandmother’s insistence on eating kosher food and keeping Shabbat in her own home was tolerated but not explained or emulated.

I partook of the usual Conservative synagogue events offered a

young child, but by my teenage years it was clear that something stronger was emerging when it came to my interest in Judaism. Even so, it was not encouraged, and I bounced back and forth. I skipped Hebrew school more times than not, but when I turned thirteen I begged my parents to send me to Midrasha, an ambitious religious late-afternoon program that focused on Jewish learning. As good parents they indulged my wish, but unfortunately, not my interest. I was very much alone in my growing faith.

Then, fate took over. It just so happened that my grandparents' summer home was on the same street as the summer home of the Grand Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Horowitz, the Bostoner Rebbe. This street overlooks the lovely bay waters. My mother and other neighbors referred to the Rebbe's home as "the boarding house" because of the large number of Shabbat guests who promenaded by our broad front porch on Saturday afternoons for their Shabbat walks.

My maternal grandfather sent my mother and her siblings to a Reform temple—although he *davened* every day, sometimes at the Rebbe's house. However, as respected as the Rebbe and his family were by my parents, there was a definite feeling that "those people" were archaic—relics from the past.

I felt differently and found myself fascinated. I was "drawn in" by the singing and prayers that gave the air a kind of spiritual fragrance that both soothed and inspired. I used to stand at the fence in front of the house pretending to glance at the water so I could listen without being teased. I silently ached to go into their home on Shabbat but was afraid to admit it. When we took our evening walks my mother used to tease me about the religious young men who refused, out of modesty, to come out of the water until we passed them by. When I defended them, she chuckled and tartly suggested that if I felt that strongly about it, "I should give up my plans to go to college and instead go find a match for myself



An example of a traditional hogan.

among the Chassidim."

God had the last laugh. I would later learn that one of the rabbi's young guests who refused to come out of the water was Rabbi Meir Fund of Brooklyn's Flatbush Minyan. More than twenty years later, it was he who gently guided me back to a path of religious observance.

I met Rabbi Fund when I filmed him for a segment on the PBS program *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*. One thing led to another, and before long I was a regular guest at his Shabbat table where his extraordinary wife, Ruchama, a gifted psychologist as well as a gracious and sensitive *rebbetzin*, further influenced my decision to respond to an inner yearning to become more religious. I moved from the East Village to the Upper West Side to more easily embrace Jewish religious life. There I had the good fortune to become a regular Shabbat guest of Rabbi and Rebbetzin Emanuel Gettinger and a devoted member of the rabbi's outstanding women's *shiur*, where I deepened my understanding of sacred Jewish texts.

But the path was not an easy one—particularly since I was already in mid-life. My life was set, and I enjoyed it. Friends were baffled when I was unwilling to join them for films or dinners on Saturday before the sun had set and the Havdalah ceremony was over. It was ironic that many of my Native American friends understood and

accepted my religious convictions and traditions better than many of my fellow Jews.

BACK IN THE HOGAN

Now, in the hogan, I felt in some ways as if I was back in Brooklyn. The Navajos cherish their children and several little ones were sliding on and off available laps. Participants were asked to wash their hands prior to eating and the recitation of prayers. The hogan itself reminded me of a sukkah, and I remembered the sukkah decorations of my friends' grandchildren as I admired the pictures that decorated the hogan walls.

The afternoon was filled with a lot of laughter and celebration. The meal began with traditional Navajo prayers recited by Ted. He offered his good wishes and thanks to everyone who had come to share in the celebration. I encountered warm and gracious hospitality and lively conversation, which I always experience when visiting Native American homes. Ted, "Grandpa," was clearly proud of his granddaughter: a modest young woman who had studied at top-tier colleges in the East Coast.

Ted was a slim man who looked to be in his late fifties with probing, thoughtful eyes; he displayed a quick wit and a sensitive intelligence. His gait was quick and purposeful. I knew that many medicine men were known for being astute diagnosticians, but I was

taken aback when after a brief conversation Ted seemed able to zero in on what was really troubling me beneath the surface of my thoughts.

I was heading into the main house when we crossed paths. I told him how happy I was to be included in the celebration; then, in the Native American manner, I spoke of my own roots. (Native Americans I have met or listened to at gatherings often introduce themselves by mentioning their clan affiliations and sometimes the names of their grandparents and great-grandparents.)

“My grandparents,” I told him, “were from Ukraine, Galicia, Lithuania and Turkey.” I told him I had lost many relatives in the Holocaust. When I finished I noticed he gave me a thoughtful and penetrating glance.

“That is the reason why you are here,” he said.

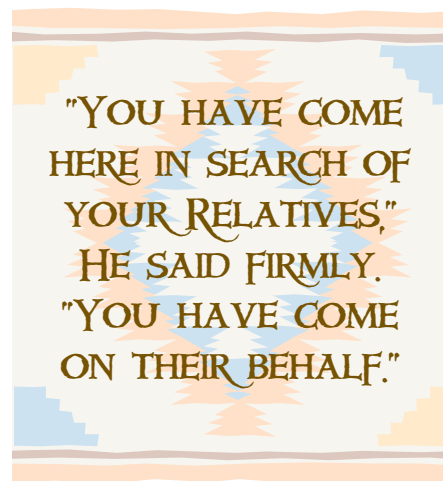
I was baffled. As I reiterated how happy I was to join them in celebrating their granddaughter’s graduation, I watched a small smile form on his lips.

“You have come here in search of your relatives,” he said firmly. “You have come on their behalf.”

I was too intimidated to ask him what he meant by this and was also a little bit annoyed. I felt misunderstood. What did “my life” have to do with my presence at the celebration and my good wishes for his granddaughter’s achievements? It wasn’t long before I fully comprehended and appreciated the accuracy of his statement.

After the ceremony ended, my concerns about my own religious practice seemed even more pressing. Not long before sunset, Ted and Sara entered the living room to apologize for having to leave early: someone required treatment. Marilyn explained to me that her father was awakened at all hours of the night by people who needed his services.

As Ted was preparing to leave, Marilyn asked him to conduct a ceremony for his granddaughter. His granddaughter was about to engage in intense preparation for her medical boards and was tired from her college finals and the move back home. The ceremony took place in the same hogan where the celebration had been held. I was curious about it and assumed I would need to wait outside, but Ted graciously invited me inside the hogan, which had been cleared of all tables and chairs. I decided to accept.



I was directed to sit on a cushion next to Marilyn’s daughter and boyfriend. Ted sat in the center by the back wall, facing the door, which traditionally faces the east. Sara and Marilyn sat next to me. The atmosphere seemed quiet, nurturing, peaceful.

It’s hard to describe the ceremony without taking it out of context or risking misinterpreting it—or worse, trivializing aspects of it. (It would be similar to the difficulty of asking a non-Jew who had never been inside a shul to accurately describe the meaning and context of putting on tefillin or reading a specific portion from the Torah.) What I *can* say is that sweet grass from

the plains and dried cedar were burned, that many of the ceremonial objects were taken directly from nature, and that I have rarely experienced such a profound humility as was expressed by Ted in the manner in which he conducted himself. I can also say that there were no religious icons and that the ceremony (if my memory serves me correctly) lasted about thirty minutes. Even though the ceremony was done on behalf of Ted’s granddaughter, it seemed prayers were also offered for the good health and well being of everyone present. At the end of the ceremony, we were encouraged to breathe in the smoke from the fire. It seemed to restore balance in the manner I often felt after a particularly deep and nourishing sleep.

The ceremony was conducted primarily in Navajo, although Ted translated some of the words for those of us who did not speak the language. Although I can’t remember his exact words, the crux of his message was clear: he said it was erroneously believed that Navajo people have many gods. He went on to explain that Navajo people believe in one God, a supreme Creator, “The Almighty One,” but that Navajo traditions teach that all religions should be respected and have something to offer.

At first I was merely an observer at the ceremony, but it wasn’t long before I experienced a sense of release—as if some tension, some knot, had been untied. I began to relax, and in my mind I felt as if I were in two places at once: here in the hogan and also in shul. The simplicity and directness of the prayers, the humility of the medicine man and his reverent demeanor, transported me back to synagogues I frequented in Brooklyn and Manhattan.

The Navajo language has guttural elements and the words sometimes


sound like Hebrew. While Ted said his prayers, snatches of Hebrew prayers entered my mind. And that's when I understood the answer to the question that had haunted me since my arrival in the southwest. What drew me to Orthodox observance was what I was witnessing here in the hogan and what I had witnessed throughout the last twenty-four hours. It was an authentic and humble and direct relationship to God that included Him in every aspect of life.

What was missing from the synagogues of my youth was this authenticity—this direct connection to God in a manner that included both awe and devotion. Growing up in the Reform and Conservative households of my family and friends, God's presence was amorphous—it was as if He lived like a hermit in the shul up the street. We paid Him a visit and begged Him for forgiveness for our sins on the High Holidays and learned about his Torah and traditions in Hebrew school, but that was it. Judaism wasn't *lived*. Sitting in the hogan among people living their traditions, watching Ted pray in the four directions and engage in rituals integral to Navajo tradition, freed me to feel and therefore understand the significance and importance of my own traditions and ceremonies. I needed to *live* Judaism to be happy—not just be a spectator or a member of a “club” with dues, in the form of prayer and religious observance, collected twice on the High Holidays.

In the small untidy shuls of Brooklyn, at the Shabbat tables of my friends, in the big sanctuaries of the Upper West Side, there is still, thank God, that authenticity—the seriousness and directness of prayer. Even at gatherings where there seemed to be more interest in the Kiddush clubs than in the Kiddush itself, there is still the consciousness that for a Jew *not* to be present, *not* to be serious, robs Jews and God of much higher and important dues—the obligations and responsibilities of living lives as Jews with all the struggles, joys and challenges such lives entail.

Sadly, I realized it was futile to try and explain my religious beliefs to my family. I understood my connection to this Navajo family as well; without my saying a word about my own traditions, they understood. Perhaps it was this unspoken but shared reverence that made my friendships with traditional Native Americans so rich and satisfying.

The medicine man was right. I had come on behalf of my ancestors, in the sense of their relationship to Judaism, the strictly observant great-grandfathers and their fathers and grandfathers whom I would never know. In the best tradition of medicine men, Ted expressed words that were more than an observation, they were a diagnosis!

Maybe William Penn was correct—perhaps some members of the Lost Tribes made it to our shores. I don't need that confirmation. I am grateful for a people whose traditions helped me find harmony and balance within my own. 

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