

Reflections on Being a Loser at Jewish Geography

Where
are you
from?

Where
did you
grow up?

Where did
you go
to school?

“And tell me, where did you used to daven?”

It was an innocent question, e-mailed by a stranger seeking my advice about something or other. As the e-mails flew between us, we discovered that we'd grown up in the same neighborhood. Small world, right?

She followed up with the usual questions about my maiden name (mine was common and vaguely Jewish-sounding) and where I'd gone to school (not a Bais Yaakov or a coed yeshivah, but good enough to keep me in the game for Jewish geography purposes).

Then came the next question. “Where did your family daven?” she wanted to know. For me, this was *the* question, like the pea in the princess's mattress. This was the way to determine whether or not I was authentically FFB, *frum* from birth.

What bugged me more than the question was its answer—the true answer, the one I never give—that I'd grown up without a shul. In the Orthodox world, not being connected to a

shul is about as socially correct as being homeless.

It's not as if my parents had some bone to pick with the Ribbono shel Olam. They didn't; they were good people, *ehrlicher Yidden*, who valued their Judaism enough to pay extravagantly for me to attend the best Jewish day school in our city.

It was just that in our neighborhood the shuls were scary places—grand sanctuaries with crystal chandeliers and velvet pews; rabbis with doctorates and wealthy, socially prominent members. My parents, with their thick accents and Old World ways, just didn't feel comfortable enough to join. True, there were other types of shuls—*shteibelach*—but they were for the elderly and strictly Orthodox, not for my family.

So every morning my father recited prayers alone in the kitchen and on Friday at dusk my mother lit candles, whispering the blessing in her raspy, Galicianer-accented Hebrew. On the High Holidays we went to services in the grand ballroom of a slightly shabby hotel, but that wasn't like having a real

shul—a place where my father would get an *aliyah*, my mother would slice marble cake for the *kiddush* and a candy man would ply me with sweets.

That was fine until I started going to day school. I remember watching from my bedroom window on Shabbat morning as my classmates went to services with their parents, all of them *farputzed* in their elegant Shabbat-wear.

I wasn't quite sure what went on at those big shuls, but it had to be better than what I was doing, which was staying at home and watching cartoons.

In fourth grade, my Judaic studies teacher told the class that we should go to shul on Shabbat, and so I asked my mother to take me. “No,” she said, but my father agreed and so began a ritual that continued until I hit puberty.

Now we, too, got up every Shabbat morning and put on our best clothes. But the shul we walked to wasn't Orthodox, and it had an organ and a

Devora Lifshutz is a pen name.

choir. Invariably, we'd arrive late—around Mussaf time—and my father would settle down for a little *shluff*. I'd *daven* a quick Shemoneh Esrei and run out to play, but I never really enjoyed the ritual.

Even at the age of nine, I could tell that this was the wrong kind of shul. It wasn't like the shuls my classmates attended, nor was it the kind my teacher had in mind, but I didn't have any way

This time, however, I felt emboldened by the anonymity of e-mail, and decided to tell the stranger the truth.

"We didn't really have a shul," I typed back.

There was no response. Our little e-friendship was over. I suspect that my bluntness frightened my erstwhile pen pal, this FFB aristocrat who probably never missed a Shabbat in shul from the moment she was born.

phy, hate the fact that my life doesn't align neatly on one of the game's imaginary coordinates.

I used to think I was alone in this feeling, but I've discovered that plenty of folks feel the same way. There are other Jewish geography haters: *ba'alei teshuvah*, converts, people from small towns.

A friend told me that she once hosted a new *ba'alat teshuvah* for Friday night dinner. Wanting to be friendly, she started asking the usual questions (Where are you from? Where did you grow up? Where did you go to school?). Suddenly the girl turned bright red. "I'm tired of questions. Everyone asks me so many questions!" she yelled. From then on, my friend stopped asking such questions. And so, I think, should the rest of us.

The laws of proper speech forbid one from asking questions that might prove to be embarrassing, unless there is an important reason to do so. Certainly the game of Jewish geography is not that essential. If *ahavat Yisrael* and *kiruv rechokim* are truly meaningful to us, then we should say goodbye to Jewish geography. ■

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of explaining this to my dad. Besides, what would we have done in an Orthodox shul, with him sitting alone in the men's section and me alone in the women's gallery? So we kept up the tradition until I hit my early teens and started going to another shul, an Orthodox one with an NCSY chapter.

I usually mention that shul as an answer to the dreaded shul question.

Looking back on our little exchange, I'm shocked by the degree to which this question still bothers me. I'm sure some would assure me that I should be proud to have started going to shul on my own at such a young age, but that isn't how I feel.

Even as I creep toward fifty, I still feel ashamed of my "no-shul upbringing." To this day, I hate Jewish geogra-



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