

Chag sameach. I would like to thank Rabbi Tucker for this opportunity to speak to you and share a bit about myself – my path to Judaism and what that journey means and has meant to me. Usually I start presentations by explaining who I am professionally – a recently-minted PhD from Northwestern University whose research interests include Catholic sacred music from Mexico between 1550 and 1850. I must admit that, as a musicologist and professor, I find it rather unusual to do a presentation without a musical example or PowerPoint slides! But today I introduce to you my whole self:

My name is Dianne Marie Lehmann Goldman, and I am a Jew.

It wasn't always that way, though. You may know me better as the Eliazer's EX-Shabbos goy. Last summer and into the fall, I appeared in shul on Saturday mornings pushing Shoshana in her stroller. Through Shira and Norman I was introduced to a great number of lovely people, and many of you asked us about how I was related – Sister? Cousin? Friend? My response was that I was a good friend, and this is of course the truth. But I was always a little uncomfortable about responding because the full answer goes like this: Because of the eruv laws, Shira and Norman had a need for someone to push the stroller and I had a need to learn to read Hebrew. Although I had committed to the process of converting to Judaism, I was not yet official. Rather than insult each other by an exchange of money, we exchanged services in kind, and it was a match made in heaven. As you can imagine, I learned how to read and so much more!

Although I had lived since I came to Chicago in 2005 with a Jewish person (my husband, Steve) in a Jewish house according to the Jewish calendrical cycles, I had not had any formal education in Hebrew or Jewish traditions or beliefs. In late 2013, when we started attending BHCBE regularly, the afternoon study time between Minchah and Ma'ariv became my introduction to all things halachic. I soaked up as much information as I could as quickly as I could. At the time, the group was focusing on Tractate Berachos and I remember one lesson in particular was on the morning blessings. "What a great idea," I thought, "to thank G-d every morning for the wonderful things around you." But when I heard what they were, especially the three difficult ones, I had second thoughts. I asked myself, "How could've G-d so screwed up when making me?"

G-d made me a woman, a goy, and in many ways, G-d made me a slave. The following stories will hopefully help explain why I thought that and how I've since come to terms with those three morning blessings.

This was not the first time I had asked myself why G-d had so messed up with me. Indeed, it was a question that I had struggled with throughout my childhood – asking it to myself, and trying to answer when my parentsyes, my parents, told me so. I won't say much about my parents, except that much of my childhood was very difficult and painful, and the physical and mental chains they put on me were tight indeed. It wasn't a total loss, though, as my grandmother, my mother's mother (may her memory be for a blessing), helped raise me and taught me about morals, about working hard, and about humility. Despite being Catholic, she never went to church. Instead she said things like, "I don't have to be in some dusty building to find G-d. G-d is all around us!" She fed me homemade strawberry cake and let me put black olives on my fingertips and pretend I was a space alien. As far as I'm concerned, she was an angel.

Early on, I decided that I wanted nothing to do with the espoused religions of my family, Methodist and Catholic. If those religions shaped the behavior of my parents, there had to be better options available. While I did not reject G-d outright, I had little guidance in trying to figure out where and how I fit within the world. Like many young people, I went looking for G-d in all sorts of places – people, things, even other versions of Christianity, and I think I came pretty close to succeeding a couple of times. But regardless, it never felt right.

And then one night, in the summer of 2003, I met Steve, the man I am blessed to call my husband, at a music workshop. He had approached me earlier in the evening to inquire about how I learned to play both violin and oboe, but I rudely brushed him off. It was about midnight as I walked past him on my way back to my dorm room, and all of a sudden I felt an inclination. I looked back at him and the effect was like being struck by lightning. Instantly, I knew I was to marry him. How? I have no idea.

I quickly grabbed one of his friends and whispered, "Do you know his last name?" (Why THAT was my first question instead of if he was married, or something more useful, I'll never know.) The response, "Yeah...his name is Goldman." "Goldman!" I exclaimed too loudly. "Isn't that a Jewish name?" My parents, among other delightful traits, were somewhat anti-Semitic. The last words of my father's father on his death bed

are relevant here: “We are NOT Jewish!” he said, perhaps suggestive of some hidden moment in our family’s history. But it seemed some of my parents’ negative feelings about Jews had rubbed off on me accidentally.

For an entire year, I tried to contact Steve with no luck. I spent the meantime deep in thought. “If I’m supposed to marry him, then that means I’ll be marrying a Jewish man. But I don’t know anything about Judaism. Would I have to learn? Would I have to convert? Do I even believe in G-d? Are the things my parents said about Jews true? Does he even know my name?” I was 22.

When the music workshop rolled around again, I was thrilled to see him there. I had prayed – yes, I had decided I did believe in G-d – that he would be there. To my great surprise, he did know my name, he did remember me, and he returned my interest! We were in a long distance relationship for a year while I finished my Master’s degree in California, and then I moved out to Chicago to start the doctoral program in musicology at Northwestern.

Now, that was a year of firsts. My first night in a man’s house; my first sleepover with a great dane; my first snowfall; my first accidental spinout on an icy street in my car; my first Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. I got here in mid-August and Yom Kippur was in October...on my birthday. Imagine him trying to explain to me why we couldn’t celebrate. No festive dinner, not even any water to drink! Sure, we had had “the talk” about religion, the one where he said he would always be Jewish, and live in a Jewish house, and hoped to raise his children as Jewish...but I was now just 24 (25 after Yom Kippur) and I didn’t have a concept of what that really meant. To his great credit, he put no pressure on me to convert, only to learn, to try to understand, and to respect the tradition he came from.

Years went by in this way: every Friday we lit candles, every High Holidays we went to shul, and for his parents’ yahrzeits we lit two more candles. That was as much Judaism as I knew about, as much as I could handle, and Steve never pushed. And then, after much prodding from me and everyone else around him, Steve proposed marriage and I accepted! Now the religion question was real. It was important to Steve to have a rabbi officiate. The only rabbi who would officiate at a mixed marriage was a reform rabbi. He would only do it if we

agreed to raise any kids we had as Jews – I hesitated, knowing I was about to sign up for a lifetime of guilt and gefilte fish if I wanted to fit in.

But I also felt nothing but disdain for my own heritage. And so I agreed, not because I wanted to get the rabbi to marry us, but because during those five years I had come to learn about Judaism and Jewish people, about the focus on tikkun olam, about the value of forgiveness and fairness, and I had learned about his aunt's noodle kugel. Our wedding was held in a banquet room at the Old Orchard Maggiano's with a chuppa, a reform rabbi, and as many of our friends and family as could make it; my parents and brother were not in attendance.

After the wedding, I noticed a shift in my attitude. "I'm a wife now," I thought. "I am in charge of making this thing called a 'Jewish household,' whatever that is. I know, I should learn to read Hebrew." It came relatively easily, giving me more confidence. Slowly, my identity also shifted. Once a colleague asked me, "How did a nice Jewish girl like you get involved with studying Catholic liturgical music?" Luckily, I had become good friends with Professors Ted Karp and Judith Schwartz, whom I knew from Northwestern, and had just the answer for him. Rather than refute my friend by saying, "I'm not Jewish!" I responded, "Oh, that's not a question for me. You should ask Dr. Karp. I just follow in footsteps of greatness."

We came to BHCBE in the fall of 2013. Steve's boyhood synagogue had recently been acquired by another, more traditional shul where we did not feel completely comfortable. During a lull in the Rosh Hashanah service I happened to flip through the machzor and landed on the inside cover of the book, where the names of the person who donated that book were listed. To my amazement, I had picked up the book donated by Ted and Judith Karp! We hadn't known they were members here, and yet we instantly went from knowing no one at the synagogue to having a foot in the door. But it wasn't just that – everyone was friendly! People introduced themselves, asked about us, showed us around, and invited us to sit with them. It felt like a community, a place where people would want to show up every week. It was at that service that Rabbi Tucker said something about goats that so intrigued me that I contacted her and we started discussing theology and other issues. That I wasn't Jewish came as a surprise to her, but she was very supportive and welcoming just the same. We struck up a friendship and my non-Jewish-self went into hiding.

And then, disaster struck! One afternoon we did not have a minyan for Minchah; or rather, we would have had one except the tenth person in the room wasn't Jewish – me! I whispered to my husband, "I'm the one who doesn't count." Still not fully used to egalitarian synagogues he responded, "Well, it's because you're a girl." "No, dear, it's because I'm not Jewish – think about it...the rabbi is a girl!" There was an awkwardness in the air, although perhaps I was the only one who felt it. Which of us was preventing the group from doing the whole service? I didn't want the Jewishness of the others present to be called into question. So, between Minchah and Ma'ariv I came out of my goyishe closet. The supportive and loving response that I received from Jeremy Kraff, Eva Sern, and Marcie and Rick Eskin overwhelmed me. How could I not want to be part of this community?

It was not long after that that I decided to formally convert. I emailed Rabbi Tucker with the phrase, "I'm in!" and she volunteered to be my sponsoring rabbi. Like when I saw Steve, like when I saw the Karp's name in the machzor, lightning struck a third time letting me know this is what I'm supposed to be doing. When I told to Steve that I was going to convert, he broke into tears and revealed that he always hoped I would but never wanted me to know how much it meant to him so I wouldn't feel pressured. There was a lot of crying that day. It was December 24, 2013, Christmas Eve. I told him, "I want to celebrate my decision. What's the most Jewish thing we can do?" He didn't even have to think about it. We had Chinese for dinner.

I have to tell you, our rabbi is the real deal. She showed such patience and chesed to me during the time I was studying for conversion. On my part, I was learning new ways of expressing new ideas and the process was exciting. When Shira and Norman suggested the exchange of pushing the stroller for Hebrew tutoring, I jumped at it. The patience they showed was incredible too. There was the time I treifed one of their knives, which was met not with anger or annoyance but with understanding and explanation. Norman, having heard me recite the "Aleinu" prayer, tried to have me read it. I almost cried because I couldn't, I had learned it by ear exclusively. But he and Shira went slowly and taught me the meaning of what I was saying as I learned it.

The mikvah was a challenge which I overcame only by the depth of my desire to see the conversion process through. One of my major fears is putting my head underwater, and the thought of having to do it

multiple times while naked, and with someone watching, was nearly a deal-breaker. But no, there was no way around it...only through it. And thanks to a patient *beit din* and the presence of my husband Steve, my role model/mentor Rabbi Tucker, and my best friend Shira, I was able to make it through without having too big a panic attack. A lively celebration was held at the Karp's house and after dinner I was asked to lead the *birkat hamazon*. Yes, I was official!

My first holiday as an official Jew was *Simchas Torah*. What a perfect beginning! The reading of the Torah had begun again, and this time I get to be a part of it. I'll never forget my first *hakafa*, holding a scroll. I felt like a kid with a grin to match. I converted on a Tuesday and that Saturday I was called to the Torah for an *aliyah*. And thanks to the *Eliazer's* careful tutoring, I was able to read the whole third passage of *Bereshis* – the story of the creation of woman. In the process, I was singing my Jewish self into existence.

I recently celebrated my seven-month convert-iversary so you can see I'm still really new at this whole being Jewish thing. I'm learning new ideas and skills all the time, and I am graciously given the opportunity to try them out. I learned *Havdalah*, and have often been able to fulfill that role at the Saturday *Ma'ariv* service, I read the first two *aliyahs* on *Rosh Chodesh Iyar* and *Sivan*, I joined the choir, and last night I gave one of the talks at the *Tikkun Leil*.

Going forward, there is much more to learn. And, yes, there are a few Jewish ideas that don't sit quite right with me. To me, it is a great tragedy that I cannot honor the memory of my grandmother the way many other Jews honor their loved ones, with the *El malei racamim* prayer. Sure, I understand that it makes halachic sense, but it doesn't make *human* sense. Instead, I honor her by having chosen as my Hebrew name (*Me'ira*) an anagram of the name she gave me (*Marie*).

Also, although I know it is mentioned in a favorable way only, I abhor the term "Jew by Choice." Perhaps I dislike it because it implies that today I choose this but tomorrow I might choose something different; or perhaps it is because we all choose to live Jewishly every day and to set converts apart because of an accident of birth seems strange and unfair to me. Certainly others are welcome to use it, but I find it distasteful.

In truth, though, these are minor issues compared to the great joy I feel. Every time I am honored by being allowed to participate in the rituals I get the biggest smile. I can't help but look completely ridiculous as I grin, but I don't care, and even if I did care I just can't stop smiling. When you see this look, know that it's the sign of a girl who knows she's come home, whose spirit is finally comfortable in her skin, who, at last, can answer the question that has plagued her for decades. G-d didn't screw me up.

Blessed is Hashem, ruler of the universe, who made me woman: so I can, G-d willing, partner with my husband and with G-d to create life.

Blessed is Hashem, ruler of the universe, who made me a slave: so I can know what it is to be free.

Blessed is Hashem, ruler of the universe, who made me a goy: so I can know what it is to choose.

Chag sameach.