

## THE HEALING LIGHT OF JUDAISM

Erev Rosh Hashanah comes in the autumn, a season of ending, a phase of change, a threshold, a liminal space of ritual taking stock of where we are.

Being in Judaism is much more than ritual. It envelops us without interactions with others, without artistic representation. Ritual is the entrée to spiritual change. Ritual impresses physical, bodily insight on the spirit.

I had grown up in a secular home, my parents were the children of Ashkenazi immigrants from Poland, Romania, Lithuania and Russia. My parents grew up thoroughly Americanized and rejected Jewish rituals and beliefs.

My mother had gone to Sunday School and her mother had lit Shabbat candles weekly. My father had been bar mitzvahed, but that was where it ended. You aren't getting a very good picture of my parents. They were wonderful people, but they had their own ideas about Judaism.

As a child and young adult, I wasn't anywhere near the threshold to Judaism.

I started losing my sight in my left eye at age 16 due to a brain tumor, and my right eye has steadily deteriorated ever since.

Going to Israel is a vital ritual for many Jews. And it was for me, too. At age 29 I was a preschool special ed teacher in Brooklyn, wondering if I wanted to get a doctorate in anthropology. I went to seeking a feeling that I am Jewish, to strengthen my identity as a Jew. I saw people having a bar/bat mitzvah and I wanted to be more Jewish, to be Jewish with confidence. I continually wondered "Why can't I do that?"

The most important experience I had in Israel was walking into the Hadassah Hospital synagogue – seeing the whiteness of the walls and the bimah, and twelve brilliant arches of red, green, blue, and yellow. The twelve windows representing the twelve tribes, radiating the vivid colors for which Chagall

was famous. Unlike Chagall's other windows, these are lit with artificial light. But, there was nothing artificial in my reaction at first seeing them.

The hospital was a place of healing the sick and the wounded, and the colors – it seemed to me – are part of the healing. Like a dressing on the patients' wounds.

I couldn't see the details at all. The window representing the tribe of Issachar, the peace-loving tribe, has a bullet hole from the Six-Day War in 1967. Chagall decided not to repair the window because he wanted to keep it as a reminder of the conflict.

I was transfixed by the colors and the symbolism in a sea of white set high in the wall behind the bima and the ark.

Looking at the windows, I felt as if I was meeting people I already knew. A visceral familiarity. That I was meeting my ancestors. The people who formed the genesis of Judaism. I was with people I was supposed to be with. I was home.

That was my threshold to Judaism, and those windows pulled me all the way over it. Later I would a Bat Mitzvah, and get more involved in congregational life. But it was those twelve masterpieces that were the beginning for me.

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