

made me feel like I had come home. And I went home feeling like I had just done myself a very good deed.

Later, when the post-service high wore off, I began to analyze my feelings about attending services. Why had I gone, anyway? What was I trying to prove, and to whom? How much of the service did I actually understand? Did I seriously believe everything I read in the prayers, the psalms and the *Torah* portions? And if I didn't actually believe what I had read, wasn't I being just a bit hypocritical to say I had gotten something out of it? Did I really feel something or was I faking it? Do I really believe? In what?

As a child I could have gone on attending and practicing my religion without confronting these questions. As a thinking adult, I can't. All these years I have accepted the notion of "ethnically Jewish." I identify myself as a Jew. I accept the need for a Jewish state, but I don't see that as the central issue in Judaism. Pardon me, but isn't the central issue belief in God? Shouldn't everything else flow from that? For me to truly accept and feel comfortable with Judaism in my everyday life, I have first to understand my belief in God. Otherwise, there will always be a sense of emptiness in whatever degree of religious observance I practice. I don't think I'm alone in this either. The decline in Jewish faith that is so frequently deplored may be due in large part to the way we've been taught our religion. While we've mastered the handing down of tradition and history, are we really addressing the issue of faith? In an era of "question authority" we can no longer take it for granted.

Belief in God can't be taught. Until I find it, though, these life cycle events and observances for the sake of my children continue to keep me closer to my religion than I otherwise would have been. They keep alive a climate that could nurture a spark of faith should one ever alight. □

### **Variety: personal religious experience**

#### *Rachel Conescu*

During the last few years, I have resisted High Holy Day services at my parents' synagogue. I am tongue-tied in the midst of childhood friends, helpless without a partner to parade on my arm. While they marry, have kids, and pursue fabulous careers, I sink deeper and deeper into the same old garbage. Perhaps the men and the jobs have changed, but the story remains the same.

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RACHEL CONESCU *having taught in Manhattan, is about to seek new adventures out west.*

This year, I had considered attending services here in the city. The anonymity was appealing to me, though the price tag was something to consider. Was it worth the High Holy Day fees charged by local synagogues and religious organizations? Should I take the plunge and actually *join* a synagogue so that I could reap the benefits of membership throughout the year? I pondered my options—until I was laid off from my job just before Labor Day. Suddenly, I was without money and looking to move out west within the year.

I succumbed to familial pressure and attended *Rosh Hashanah* services on Long Island. The real attraction was my brother and sister-in-law who were visiting from Seattle. It had been years since Josh and I sat through services together, reciting our lit-

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## **Sh'ma**

*a journal of Jewish responsibility*

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any of snide remarks. Other than the *Avinu Mal-keinu* and the *Haftarah* reading, I paid little attention. Of course, I did set aside time to read the Meditations located in the prayer book between the *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* services. They speak to me in a way that the rest of the service does not.

Those Meditations helped me understand my resistance to High Holy Days. It's not just the insipid conversations with old playmates, or the extravagance, the downright gaudiness of the congregants' dress. It's the service itself. Responsive readings ring flat. The choir reminds me of church. During services, I always find myself following my own agenda—reading the Meditations, Additional Prayers, *Haftarah* portions, psalms.

### Heeding the Duties of the Heart

I was determined to pursue that agenda for *Yom Kippur* this year. I did not go to Long Island. Nor did I attend services in the city. Accompanied by a high holy day book I had borrowed from the synagogue, my Bible, and a group of friends who, though Jewish, had no desire to atone, I headed for our summer house on the Jersey shore.

It turned out to be a memorable day. The weather was cool and inspiring. The beach beckoned; I spent the entire day there. I perused the High Holy Day prayer book without distraction. I turned to favorite passages from the Bible. I took two long walks. I must have stared at the ocean for hours, measuring my shortcomings over the past years, projecting how life on the west coast would be different for me, contemplating how Portuguese Jews across the ocean observe their *Yom Kippur*—and juxtaposing these thoughts against the subjects of last week's beach conversations: the strength of ultraviolet rays, the price of swordfish, the latest cartoons from *The New Yorker*.

Despite my solitude, I did sense the presence of a community surrounding me—a Jewish community. After a lifetime of observance at my parents' house of worship, I knew the day's schedule by heart: morning services end by around 1:00; the study session ends by around 2:00; on to the Children's, the Afternoon, *Yizkor*, and Concluding Services. We break fast with my aunt's family between 6 and 7. That day at the beach, I occasionally turned to the appropriate service for that time of day.

Frankly, a part of me missed my folks that day, as well as my network of old friends, who, for better or worse, I regard as my extended family. I was aware that there was something decidedly un-Jewish about observing *Yom Kippur* by myself. If Jewish faith is rooted in action, how absurd to be going

through these motions in solitude. Of course, there must be more to Judaism than commitment to the community. Isn't one's faith an essentially personal, private affair? How does one balance the public and private facets of one's faith? It would have been nice to pose the question to someone right there on the beach.

### Rejoining the Secular Majority

I returned to my heathen friends at the summer house. They had just returned from their miniature golf marathon and were lighting coals for the barbecue. While their presence was a comfort to me, their banter was difficult to assimilate. I sucked down a beer but couldn't shed my pensiveness. They accused me of casting aspersions on their faithlessness.

By the end of the meal, I had crawled off my pedestal and declared myself ready for the final religious experience of this year's *Yom Kippur*. I thought it appropriate to visit Atlantic City with an unblemished record of sin. As the hours passed, my friends gained and lost at the blackjack table. I was far more interested in the fanfare surrounding me. Who are these people? Are we all sinners? How many of these sinners are Jews? How many of these Jews attended services today? Who am I to judge? Did I attend services today? Is that the mark of an observant Jew?

There I was, standing outside of myself, questioning the profane to the sacred. Not one of these questions had dawned on me during any other visit to Atlantic City; I was still in my atonement mode. That wasn't such a bad thing either. For as long as I could remember, I had observed *Yom Kippur* within the antiseptic confines of my synagogue. Today's perspective was a refreshing lesson to me. It's not that I can't think about the sacred while I practice the profanity of my mundane life. The fact is that I don't, and I appreciated the opportunity to do so on this day.

We had parked that night at the "Praise the Lord" lot near our favorite casino. Despite my high-falutin' musings, I managed to lose \$40 at the blackjack table. Even insight has its price. □

### Variety: the religion of people and life

*Jane Gould*

I can only write what I believe, what I have discovered in my life. I can only believe what in the deep-

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JANE GOULD is a freelance writer in Woodmere, N.Y.