

Hi. I'm Anna Lord.

My Jewish journey has been one from fear and wandering in the desert of the Christian Fundamentalist movement, through narrow places of uncertainty and struggle, and emerging into the present, here with you, on the eve of Yom Kippur, as we complete the Days of Awe with a seeking to forgive the past, and begin the New Year with atonement and clarity.

I was raised by back-to-the-land hippies in rural Washington State. My mother, not Jewish, had been "saved" as a born-again Christian a few years before I was born, and she raised my siblings and me in a small, non-denominational, lay-led, fundamentalist Christian church. Meaning, we had no ordained clergy, we were unaffiliated with any official religious organization, believed in literal interpretation of the Bible, upheld an explicitly patriarchal family hierarchy, and believed that only the elect would inherit the Kingdom of G-d. Our salvation would attain for us life everlasting, in the company of Christ, at the right hand of G-d.

My father, whose mother was Jewish, and who considers himself a Jew, was a gentle, content agnostic, and left the religion and child-raising to my mother.

We were taught by our Sunday school teacher that, not only was our father going to suffer eternal damnation when he died, but without the headship of a strong Christian father, we, his woman and children, were *all* vulnerable to the predations of Satan. I certainly felt this to be true, and I prayed fervently for my father's salvation. I was an open-hearted and credulous child, who longed to find comfort in the arms of a loving G-d. This is not what I got.

There was millennialist fervor present in the larger fundamentalist movement in the early 1980s, and our church was fully on board – praying for Christ's triumphal return, "The Rapture." We were instructed to be ready, day or night, to give account of ourselves before our savior. Constant self-examination and policing of thoughts, seeking out evidence of my own "sin nature," became an automatic habit of mind for me, as young as I can remember. I myself said the "sinner's prayer" at six years old, asking for salvation from sin and from the punishment of hell. In commemoration I received the gift of my own red New Testament, with golden-edged pages and my name written inside. Thus, I became born-again. My name, I was told, had been inscribed in the Book of Life for all time.

The problem was, it didn't take. My fear and shame were so great, I would pray over and over and over again as I lay wakeful at night, "Jesus, save me. Jesus, save me." I never was able to believe that he could. I feared hell with a desperation that approached mania. I've since learned that this is a common experience for fundamentalist children.

Rejecting the corruption of worldliness, our community also knew from many signs and revelations that we lived in the End Times. We looked, in fact, to Israel and geopolitical events in the wider world for evidence of G-d's imminent return. The Jewish people, as G-d's chosen, were a special focus of study and discussion as we puzzled out the most "literal" interpretations of Biblical prophecy. Travel to Israel was a lifelong goal for many members of our church, and Pastor Sather made a magnificent balsa wood scale model of the Tabernacle of Moses, which frightened me with its holy-of-holies-- still potentially deadly even in its model form, to my child's mind.

And so, my father's Jewishness was also a mark of distinction for me, something that made us special despite the obvious existential threat posed by his non-believer status. His mother had been raised by her Ukrainian-immigrant grandmother, who had homesteaded in Kadoka, South Dakota. Bertha Martinsky was, by all accounts, a powerhouse of a "frum", or pious, orthodox Jewish woman, running a general store and hosting traveling Jews in her (somehow?) kosher kitchen as they passed through. She spoke English, Russian, and Lakota all with her native Yiddish accent and taught her granddaughter to bless candles on Shabbat, as well as the value of what I now know as tzedakah, and tikkun olam. Her generosity and commitment to charity had earned her a reputation as someone who could be depended upon in times of need, by friend or stranger. My grandmother took these lessons to heart and embodied them herself.

I loved these grandmother stories as a child. The Bertha Martinsky in my mind was so . . . unafraid. Her actions in the world, and her religious values, sounded meaningful, and not, as mine were, almost cancelled out by the certainty of an apocalyptic near-future, and the need for constant conformity with a death-obsessed ideology.

I just want you guys to know that originally I had a lot of funny bits in here? But I took them out in the interest of time. So, just go with it.

My burgeoning adolescent consciousness brought me to break with the church around the age of 15, the same year I dropped out of high school. It was a lonely time, as leaving the church meant the end of my friendships there. And I had few others. I felt invisible, alone in space, and bereft.

Discovering the Riot Grrl punk movement of those early 1990s Northwest years, I slotted myself in seamlessly with this new, but in many ways just as cohesive, worldview. I went to college. I hardly talked or thought about religion at all. Very few people knew even the roughest outline of my fundamentalist past.

Until my early 20s, when I was hit with a long, rolling breakdown, deep depression with associated episodes of hallucination that can sometimes occur when depression is very severe – hallucinations of the apocalypse, the Last Trumpet, damned souls screaming in hell, a light in the east splitting the sky.

My training as a child of the End Times had prepared me well, and I was afraid to seek treatment because I believed that I was permanently broken. I had left the church, but not the religion, or the impossible standards set by it: self-denial, perfectionism, rigid moral thinking, fear of self-disclosure or ever being known by another as the flawed and fallen sinner I still knew myself to be. My childhood yearning for god-consciousness had been perverted into narrowness and bondage to shame.

Eventually, I found a loving therapist, who suggested that what I had experienced was spiritual abuse. And with good treatment and a lot of support, I began to heal. And forgive. My depression lifted, and my bizarre but familiar visions never returned. My mother and siblings also left the church and began their own journeys of recovery.

Previous to my breakdown, in college, I had met and fallen in love with a handsome, gentle, dark-haired, Jewish man named Alex – also a happy agnostic like my father. Before we were even dating, he invited me to a Passover Seder at his parents' house north of Chicago. I ate it up! There was a lightheartedness, a loving relationship between these people and their ancient tradition. There was debate about the history of global slavery. There were Hillel sandwiches. There was a lot of laughter. There were actual tears. I felt at home in a way I couldn't even articulate.

Attending High Holiday services with Alex's family at their Reform congregation (which also met in a church), maybe the next year, I remember gasping as I recognized my hair, my face, on some of the congregants near me. The liturgy offered complexity, emotional depth, and a tradition that seemed to allow, even welcome, varying approaches and levels of commitment to the ritual. There was repentance, atonement, but no shame. It was deeply attractive to me, feeling both safe and real.

Alex and I got married and, when we had children, we started, in various ways, to keep a Jewish home. Lighting candles on Shabbat. Hanukkah. I began to read Jewish books, and gradually understand Judaism as a place where my struggle would be welcome, a place not of certitude and legalism, but of inquiry, curiosity, and real learning. I remembered my father's comments about two Rabbis, three opinions. Such a comfort. Maybe there was a way, I thought, to do this G-d thing without committing spiritual suicide.

We found Kol Haneshamah when our second baby was born, and started attending services. I began falling in love with the liturgy. Services, prayer, study, became for me a real conduit, or a holding space, for connection. Small children, not knowing Hebrew, unfamiliarity, none of these things felt like real barriers. Slowly I started to think about conversion.

As we've celebrated the holidays at home, I see my children take their traditions for granted, expecting and relaxing into the rituals that mark the year, every cycle deepening the connections to their ancestors, their identities as members of a loving community, and offering a respite from a sometimes alienating world. There is joy there, and no shame.

Watching my children learning, I am motivated to expand my own knowledge. Study has become a healing process for me, as I learn continually how to let go of certainty, and embrace the discomfort of not-knowing, not-understanding. To hold ambiguity and paradox.

Last year, with Rabbi Zari's help, I studied and went before the world's friendliest Beit Din, submerged myself in the living waters of the community mikvah in Seward Park, and became a Jew for real. (I can show you the certificate!) All my life, I will remember the feeling of the warm water surrounding and accepting my every human cell. It was profoundly comforting, but also energizing, to go out again into the world with that sense of wholeness.

Conversion doesn't take a day, or a year, of course, it is lifelong. I'm so grateful to have found myself at Kol Haneshamah for this process. A community not just open to Jews of all flavors and backgrounds, but made up of us – Jews who are queer, Jews in interfaith families, Jews by birth and by choice, and who all, like me, are walking this path without necessarily a destination, learning along the way, healing along the way.

I come to prayer, or study, sometimes with joy overflowing, sometimes with a breaking or broken heart. I've come feeling lost and afraid. And here, I find my way back to some kind of equilibrium, in this room with all of you.

I'm so grateful. Thank you all so much for showing up, and being Jews here, together in this room, creating forgiveness and peace. Thank you for listening to me share my story. I am proud of where I've been, and I am proud of where I am now, with all of you.

May we all forgive ourselves. May we forgive others. May we forgive the past. May our names be inscribed in the Book of Life for another year. And if you are fasting, may you have a gentle fast. G'mar Hatimah Tovah.