

My Choice by Nancy Wolf

I was raised as a Presbyterian. My father was always very religious, and my mother stressed being a good person. They were both active in the church, and our attendance at services and in Sunday school was near perfect. But as a teenager I began thinking a lot about religion, and developed many questions. The discussions in Youth Group didn't help with answers; it seemed I only had more questions. My attendance at church began declining, by age 22 I was done. I have only been back for weddings or funerals. I thought my questions had to do with the existence of God. But now I know my questions had to do with the idea that Jesus was the Messiah. With the preoccupation with Jesus, where did God fit in? I walked away and decided religion held no place in my life.

I fell in love, and married a man who shared many of the same ideas of religion that I did. He didn't believe, either. We decided that our lives would be entirely secular. Of course there was no problem at all that he was Jewish, and I wasn't. It just wouldn't come up.

But after moving to Omaha with a growing family, we discovered the many things about family life that cannot be known without experience. We enrolled our son in the preschool at the JCC, and I soon learned that there were many things about the Jewish religion and culture that I did not know. I was amazed to find out that my husband had a lot to learn, too. Meanwhile, our older child would come home from public school in kindergarten and first grade asking many questions about God and religion. When Alex graduated from preschool, his father decided that contact with Jewish friends should not be lost, so he decided we should join Temple Israel. My reactions were annoyance, amazement, resentment and finally agreement. But only on condition that it be a participatory arrangement for the entire family. We would all learn; we would be involved.

At first I was self-conscious and embarrassed that people would think I didn't belong. But the staff was very welcoming, and soon after joining we received a phone call inviting us to an Outreach meeting. I realized that there was a place for us, and it alleviated a lot of the anxiety of our lack of Jewish knowledge.

As a couple we enrolled in Derekh Torah through the JCC, and so began our true journey to becoming a Jewish family. We studied, argued, laughed, cried and developed lasting friendships. I also discovered things about myself. When Rabbi Azriel approached me about meeting with him, I agreed. I wondered; could I really be Jewish? Would I ever feel part of the community? Why did there need to be this formal process? Wasn't it enough that my family was Jewish? Didn't that make me Jewish? After all these months of study, I answered all these questions for myself. The day came when I could truly stand up and declare; "Blessed is the Eternal our God, who has made me a Jew."

My conversion ceremony was sweet and awesome and unforgettable. Even though the room was filled with dear friends, I was aware of only myself, the Rabbi and the presence of God, the Shekhina. I felt at home. I felt at peace.

Since then my studying has continued. I participated in the Adult B'nai Mitzvah class and celebrated my Bat Mitzvah in May, 1998. Reading from the Torah was a true blessing. I enjoyed my daughter's Bat Mitzvah in January 1999 so much because I could relate personally to her triumph. I continue to study Judaic history, liturgy, Hebrew and am beginning Trope.

Just last week my happiness soared and my satisfaction as a Jewish mother reached new heights. My daughter had to describe a family tradition for a school assignment. She decided immediately that her favorite family tradition would be our Passover Seder; the

family and friends around the table, the Haggadah, the symbols of freedom from slavery. Little does she remember that four years ago we celebrated this holiday so haltingly like foreigners. Today she calls it a tradition.