

# FROM MEATBALLS TO MATZOH BALLS: A JEWISH ITALIAN-AMERICAN SPIRITUAL IDENTITY

Dina A. Gamboni, MSW Candidate, San Francisco State University

*Growing up in an interfaith, mixed-ethnicity family left the author without a religious or spiritual identity of her own. In this narrative, she describes her journey from cultural confusion and religious alienation through spiritual exploration, acceptance, and identity. Discussed are the ways in which individuals use religion, community, and spirituality to find a sense of purpose in life and the associated implications for social work practice.*



## Multiple Insides, Multiple Outsid

The shopkeeper glanced toward the two young women in hijab sitting on the floor. "They say you very beautiful," he said, "because of your big nose."

The girls giggled shyly, never taking their eyes off me. As an American accustomed to the usual American standards of beauty, I wasn't quite sure if this was a joke, or if I'd simply misheard. Perhaps my look of incredulousness demanded explanation, for he continued.

"Indonesians," he said, incorporating colorful hand gestures to illuminate his words, "have flat nose. You..." and here he paused, "have biiiiiiiig nose! Very beautiful!" He nodded, seemingly proud of his English and his explanation. The girls continued to giggle. I simply blinked and said, "Thank you."

Throughout my stay in Indonesia, I heard this refrain many times. The girls in the boarding house where I lived showered me with frequent compliments. Pregnant mothers would rub my nose for luck, with the hope that this would channel my large, striking, somewhat Semitic features to their unborn children.

This was the first time I'd ever thought of my looks as anything but flawed. What was so hard for me to reconcile was that this *hidung mancung*, or "prominent nose," that my Indonesian friends found so attractive was exactly the feature that had filled me with insecurity throughout my entire life. Even more so than a *bat mitzvah* (which I never had), a nose job (which I also never had) seems to be

every young American Jewish girl's rite of passage.

It was not for lack of family support that I never had my nose "fixed," but, mostly, fear. And I'm glad I didn't, as my looks mark who I am and where I've come from. It's interesting to me that, while many people often have a hard time placing my ethnicity, Jews never do: somehow, I'm instantly recognizable to Jewish people from all over the globe.

Yet people of Italian descent also seem to recognize me as one of their own—and rightly so. While my mother's family are Ashkenazi Jews who escaped the pogroms of Russia and Poland in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, my father's family came from Italy at about the same time.

When my parents met in the early 1960s, neither family was happy about the match, and, I'm told, there was much hand wringing and worry behind closed doors. But over time, as it became clear that my mom and dad had something special together, both sets of grandparents decided, "They could do worse," and invited each others' families into their lives without malice, and, soon, with love.

For me, dancing the delicate waltz between two distinct ethnicities and religions was easy at first. As a child, I felt uniquely special: I had more holidays than anyone! Although my parents were not religious, we celebrated both Jewish and Christian holidays in traditional fashion, with huge feasts and plenty of family. We lit a Menorah and had a Christmas tree; we found both Easter eggs and the *afikomen*. It rocked. It also was not unusual. As Cowan and Cowan (1987)



reported, many intermarried couples choose to create wonderful holiday celebrations from both traditions without adopting one religion for the family.

Despite knowing nothing about either religion, I proudly identified myself as “Half-Jewish and Half-Catholic.” But this vision of myself came crumbling down the first time I went to Hebrew School—not as part of the class, but as a visitor with a friend from elementary school. In my memory, the rabbi looms large with his black hat, stooping down with a reprimanding finger in my face. “If your mother is Jewish,” he shouted, seemingly seething with anger, “you are ALL Jewish!”

Most likely, as Mayer postulates in his 1983 book *Children of Intermarriage*, the rabbi was responding to fears that the increase in mixed Jewish-Gentile marriages, along with the fact that Jews were having fewer children as well as sustaining much weaker religious ties, could lead to a deterioration of the Jewish community in America. I, however, was much too young to comprehend or even have any knowledge of this much talked-about concern. And so this one terrifying childhood experience made me vow never to go to Hebrew School again.

### Seeking Belonging

As I grew up, my dual identity left me feeling not just more and more confused, but more and more left out. In a world of social lives organized around religion, I was the only one without one. In primary school, I desperately wanted to join the Camp Fire Girls or the Girl Scouts. Historically, these organizations were associated with God and Christianity, and I understood that there was an implication that, in the past, Jews were not particularly welcome. Because of this association, they were deemed inappropriate for me to join now. In junior high, the Cotillion dance classes given at one of our town’s exclusive social clubs were similarly out of bounds.

In high school, I was also discouraged from joining the Christian Youth Fellowship many of my friends belonged to, and was decidedly uncomfortable at the few church events I attended. Yet I also felt out of place

at the Hillel dances and the B’nai B’rith youth group activities—I’d never been to synagogue, didn’t speak Hebrew, was barely familiar with the major holidays, and didn’t even have a Jewish name. I felt I belonged nowhere.

According to Mayer (1985), this sense of alienation is common to children of inter-religious marriages. The children of marriages between Christians and Jews, he writes, are not only less likely to participate in traditional Jewish practices such as Shabbat, bar and bat mitzvahs, Jewish education or synagogue membership, but they are also much less likely to be involved with any other formalized religion, as well. This proved very true for me.

It finally hit home just how “outside” I really was, even within my own family, when I overheard a conversation among my three aunts. Discussing my cousin, one year younger than I and with whom I was very close, her mother said, “You know, she’s dating that Italian boy. What if they get married? What if they have *children*?”

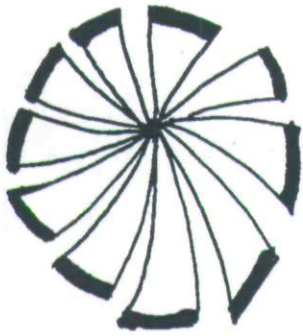
I felt like I’d been punched in the stomach. “I guess they’d be like me,” I responded quietly. My aunts clucked their tongues and tried to cover their blunder, saying, “Oh, well, your father’s different.” But I wasn’t quite sure how the 18-year-old *Gamboni* they knew way back when, before he was my father, could have been all that different from the *Ferrovicchio* my cousin was dating now.

### Validation and Alienation

Once the tricky dynamic of religion was removed, however, I always felt like a straight-up “Italian Jew” in the ethnic senses of the words. In the era of mob movies and *The Sopranos*, it was easy to glamorize being Italian-American. (Yes, my grandfather “ran numbers” for the “Italian lottery” in Brooklyn. No, I don’t know what this *actually* means.) My last name is easily confused with one of the most famous New York crime families (Raab, 2005), so we’ve had our share of lavish service and prime tables at various restaurants in the area.

And aside from the obvious religious aspect inherent in Judaism, being “Jewish” in America is a considered culture all on its own (Whitfield, 1999). The values and background of this





culture unifies American Jews from across the country in a way that can defy regional differences. The cultures of my two families, in fact, have a lot in common, highlighted by an emphasis on food, animated discussions, traditional family values, and a take-no-prisoners New York attitude.

When I arrived for my first year of college at a large Midwestern university, I was surprised to meet people who'd never met anyone either Jewish *or* Italian. Although it was easy for me to forgive the simple ignorance of my new acquaintances (Stephan: "So... do Jewish people really have horns?" Me: "You're kidding me, right?"), the blatant, hate-fueled anti-Semitism was harder to ignore. Some, thinking I was fully Italian, would share slurs with me, as if I would surely agree with them. Mostly I would just walk away from these incidents with few words, incredulousness more so than anger bubbling to the surface.

At the same time, college was the first place where I felt my identity was truly validated. Friends lovingly called me the "Pizza-Bagel" or, co-opting two normally offensive slurs, the "Guinea-Hebe," and I loved it. I learned to read Hebrew in time for Passover in a crash course at Hillel, and cooked a traditional Italian "5 Fishes" seafood dinner on Christmas Eve. Finally, my dual-cultural background once again made me feel uniquely *me*.

Yet while I felt secure in my cultural identity, there was still something missing: a sense of connection to the world, a feeling of greater meaning to the struggles of life. Even as a young teen, I was drawn to the social services, working with the Easter Seals, children's hospital, and eventually gravitating toward activism and homeless outreach and advocacy. My mission, I felt, was to help those struggling with physical, social, and emotional difficulties in their lives.

This lack of a solid spiritual foundation continued to lead me on a search for a deeper sense of life purpose, beyond a vocational calling, throughout college and after. Many of my Jewish friends attended *Shabbat* services, embracing their religious identities more fully. And several of my Protestant Christian friends

began questioning some of the more stringent tenets of their conservative religious upbringings.

As for me, I had nothing to embrace nor question. I had no concept of God, religion, or spirituality. "The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out!" was always my theory. Yet, at the same time, this declaration rang hollow. Could my understanding of reality really be all there was to life?

### Seeking Purpose and Integration

This sense of purposelessness grew, and often became punctuated by periods of malaise and depression. I began to search in earnest for an answer to these feelings of emptiness I was harboring. According to a 2007 *Newsweek* poll, 91% of Americans believe in God (Braiker, 2007), and, knowing that the majority of my friends and peers had been brought up with some form of organized religion, I turned to them to find out more about their beliefs.

I started with Judaism since, although I wasn't brought up religiously Jewish, I was brought up decidedly and emphatically "not Christian." Yet in my exploration, I experienced the same feelings of alienation I'd had as a child: I didn't understand the religious traditions and customs, nor the prayers and songs, often in Hebrew, a language I knew nothing of. And the rich culture, beyond that which I experienced at family gatherings, seemed foreign to me. I felt there was a secret code to Judaism, one I would never learn; the entire experience left me feeling once again like an outsider.

As I proceeded with my spiritual explorations and questions, I was particularly struck by a comment from a classmate who'd studied with me in Indonesia. "Dina," Kristen said gently, "I wouldn't be a friend if I didn't tell you this, but I think the answer to your struggles lies in having a relationship with Jesus." Like many born-again Christians, Kristen found great comfort in her religion (Ryle, 1885). I'd always been moved by traditional Black Gospel music, and envied Kristen her sense of calm and life purpose. I decided to join a "Christianity 101" group for "new believers" that Kristin had



recommended, right there in my small town in Upstate New York, to see if perhaps there was something I was missing.

I cannot explain the sense of awkwardness I felt at these meetings, which consisted of a pot-luck dinner, followed by a TV presentation of a very charismatic British preacher discussing the basics of Christianity, and a group discussion. Although I always felt mighty Italian at synagogue, I felt awfully Jewish in the basement of this church, surrounded by the fellowship of church-goers, all brushing up on their already established beliefs with their cloth-covered Bibles in tow. The only non-Christian there was me.

But that charismatic British preacher, whose name escapes me but whose charm never will, had something going. The lure was appealing: I wanted Jesus to absolve me of my guilt! To carry my burdens! To set my troubles down! Who doesn't want to be forgiven? Still, I had trouble with the tenet that says in order to go to heaven, one must believe in Jesus as a personal savior.

During the third or fourth group discussion, I timidly raised my hand. "My family, they're good people," I started. "They're domestic violence counselors, special-ed teachers, para-professionals working with handicapped children. They pray, they donate to charity." I paused. "But here's the thing. They're Jewish. Are they going to Hell, too?"

I was met with only silence. The minister mumbled, and looked down, as the rest of the group avoided my eyes and fumbled with their clothing. The minister's wife, however, finally spoke. "If you're asking me if I believe that God is a just god," she said slowly, carefully, and with kindness, "I do."

### **Expanding Horizons: Looking Within, Looking Without**

While I never went back to this fellowship group, it had planted a spiritual seed in my intellectual mind. I'd felt such a sense of relief and joy at the initial prospect of what Christianity had to offer, what a "relationship" with a higher power could mean, that I was inspired. It's a rush that I still feel when I hear Gospel music, or a particularly beautiful prayer, or even see an orchid or other wonder of

nature. In that moment, I felt I could learn something from all that energy.

Perhaps, I thought, the *davening* of the Jews, the prayers of the Christians, the Muslim *salah*, were all ways of getting to the same thing: a path to a universal God, energy, or spirit. Whether it is inside us or an outside force, I still hadn't—and still haven't—decided on. Yet it was the push I needed to start really looking to create my own spirituality in earnest.

I was drawn to spiritual tomes, New Age readings, and Native American spiritual literature. I studied the world of karma and reincarnation through classic Buddhist literature [Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922) was a favorite] as well as more pop-culture books oriented toward Americans such as *Surfing the Himalayas* by Frederick Lens, *That Which You Are Seeking Is Causing You to Seek* by Cheri Huber (1990), and Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now* (2004).

I then branched into more fringe concepts, reading up on astrology and exploring the alternative healing modalities of Reiki and Polarity Therapy. Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy* (1993), a now-classic "intro" to spirituality in the form of fiction, opened my eyes to the power of coincidence and intention. I pieced through Schucman's *A Course in Miracles* (1976), devoured all of Carlos Castaneda's *Adventures of Don Juan* (1969) explorations into shamanism, and read metaphysicist (and supposed psychic and channel) Jane Roberts's *Seth* (1970) teachings. My own spiritual "awakening," however, came about through a confluence of three significant books, all given to me rather than sought out.

After a close childhood friend was suddenly and tragically killed, a former professor of mine, with whom I'd remained close, gave me Rabbi Harold S. Kushner's 1981 bestseller, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. It sat on my shelf for years after my friend's death, but in my new spiritual quest, I picked it up again. Kushner's insightful writing addresses human suffering, and how a "good" God can simultaneously exist with the "evil" in the world. His book opened my mind and thoughts to the concept of a true "higher power," in the traditional sense.



And, as part of my work with support groups for people with mood disorders, I was given Marsha Linehan's *Skills Training Manual for Treating Borderline Personality Disorder* (1993). Linehan's theories combine Western cognitive-behavioral approaches to mental health with Eastern religious and mindfulness meditative practices. I began to slowly incorporate a mindfulness practice of focused attention in my own life as a way to connect to the world around me, as well as to an inner sense of calm.

But, oddly, what was most influential to my present-day spirituality had nothing to do with any formal religious teachings or modalities whatsoever. In fact, it was much simpler than that, something we do every day: walking. *There are Mountains to Climb* (1996), Jean Deed's first-person account of her solo through-hike of the Appalachian Trail at 51, opened my eyes to the spirit present within us as we do everyday rituals. I was fascinated by Deed's determinism, as well as her spiritual awakening as she hiked the trail.

### **Spirituality in Person and Practice**

Soon, I began to incorporate what I'd learned through these books into my everyday life. I found myself drawn to the woods, and, more specifically, the Finger Lakes Trail (FLT), located practically in my backyard. The FLT is a 562-mile-long trail that goes from the Pennsylvania-New York border in the west to the Catskill Mountains in the east. Two or three days a week, I would take what remained of the daylight hours after work to walk portions of the FLT. I incorporated walking meditations and an awareness of nature into my sojourns; breathing in the air as the seasons changed opened up a new sense of spiritual awakening for me. After four years, in jaunts of just a few miles to ten or so at a time, I'd walked over 300 miles of the trail. Through the joining of these intellectual, emotional, and physical experiences, I found a comfort and solidity in a pantheist nature- and energy-based spirituality. I continue to use my interactions with nature as a connection to a sense of deeper purpose. To me, growing food, recycling, and walking in the woods are all my own personal forms of prayer.

As I delve deeper into social work practice, I've come to realize the importance of religion and spirituality in recovery and healing work. When faced with a crisis such as a life-threatening illness, the loss of a loved one, or other end-of-life issues, the question of spirituality comes to the forefront, and the implications for exploration within social work practice are huge.

I've always felt uncomfortable broaching the subject with clients; as for me, these are personal and solitary experiences. Yet interestingly, the more I explore my own spirituality, the more it becomes incorporated in my work. Most recently, I had an internship at a cancer center that focuses on incorporating complementary therapies with Western-based chemotherapy and radiation treatments. This cutting-edge center provides weekly drop-in classes in stress reduction, guided imagery, mindfulness and other meditative practices, Jin Shin Jyutusu, acupuncture, and massage, as well as spiritual counseling and dream-tending workshops. My personal favorite healing approach available at the clinic is the walking labyrinth, a meditative tool to help facilitate change, growth, and discovery (<http://www.lessons4living.com>).

### **Full Circle: Embracing a Multi-Cultural Identity**

As a social worker, I enjoy listening to clients as they explore their own spiritual paths. I feel I'm uniquely placed to listen to and reflect on those struggling with a sense of religious, spiritual, and cultural identity: I understand what it's like to be alienated from one's own culture, through no fault of one's own. Still, while helping clients to explore their spiritual paths, I prefer to keep my own personal spiritual views and values to myself, hidden inside a somewhat brash New York half-Italian, half-Jewish exterior.

Within my perpetual searching and growth, I've never let go of the strong cultural ties I grew up with. Now, as an adult, I am fully secure in my identity as a religiously spiritual (pantheist), ethnically Jewish, ethnically Italian-American. Although I don't practice the religions of either set of grandparents, I embrace and embody both of their cultures—



I am comfortable and proud of my rich ethnic background. And while I politely but firmly disagree with people who refuse to allow me to identify myself as “half” Jewish, I also acutely feel the pain of knowing there are people who hate me simply for reasons that can’t be seen outwardly—except, perhaps, in my beautiful *hidung mancung*.

## References

- Braiker, B. (2007 March 30). Newsweek poll: 91% believe in God. *Newsweek*. Retrieved November 20, 2008 from <http://www.yoism.org/?q=node/320>
- Castaneda, C. (1969). *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, Ltd.
- Cowan, P., & Cowan, R. (1987). *Mixed Blessings: Marriage Between Jews and Christians*. New York: Doubleday.
- Deeds, J. (1996). *There Are Mountains to Climb: An Inspirational Journey*. IL: Silverwood Press.
- Hesse, H. (1922). *Siddhartha*. 1<sup>st</sup> World Library: Literary Society.
- Huber, C. (1990). *That Which You Are Seeking is Causing You to Seek*. Mountain View, CA: A Center for the Practice of Zen Buddhist Meditation.
- Kushner, H.S. (1981). *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. New York, NY: Avon Books.
- The Labyrinth. Accessed November 20, 2008 from <http://www.lessons4living.com/labyrinth.htm>
- Linehan, M. (1993). *Skills Training Manual for Treating Borderline Personality Disorder*. The Guilford Press.
- Mayer, E. (1983). *Children of Intermarriage: A Study in Patterns of Identification and Family Life*. USA: The American Jewish Committee.
- Mayer, E. (1985). *Love & Tradition: Marriage Between Jews and Christians*. New York and London: Plenum Press.
- Raab, S. (2005). *Five Families: The Rise, Decline, and Resurgence of America's Most Powerful Mafia Empires*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Redfield, J. (1993). *The Celestine Prophecy: An Adventure*. New York: Warner Books.
- Roberts, J. (1970). *The Seth Material*. New York: Buccaneer Books.
- Ryle, J.C. (1885). *Knots Untied: Being Plain Statements on Disputed Points in Religion, from the Standpoint of an Evangelical Churchman*. London: William Hunt and Company. Retrieved November 20, 2008 from <http://www.archive.org/details/knotsuntied00ryleuoft>
- Schucman, H. (1976). *A Course in Miracles*. Mill Valley, CA: Foundation for Inner Peace.
- Tolle, E. (2004). *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*. New World Library.
- Whitfield, S.J. (1999). *In Search of American Jewish Culture*. Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press.



Dina A. Gamboni is an MSW Candidate (2010) at the San Francisco State University School of Social Work. She is oncology social work intern at the Alta-Bates Comprehensive Cancer Center in Berkeley, California. Next year, she will intern with the San Francisco Unified School District. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: [dagamboni@noisystreet.com](mailto:dagamboni@noisystreet.com).

Copyright of Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping is the property of Cleveland State University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.