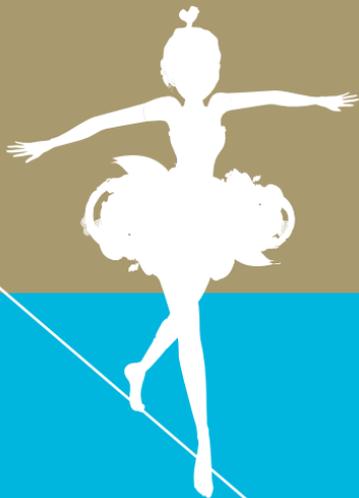
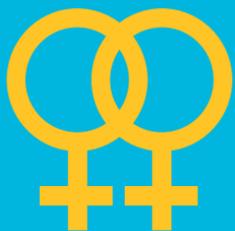


TALES OF A JEW IN TRAINING



A LOVE STORY BY **LEIGH MARZ**



CHAPTER ONE

THE EARLY YEARS: GAY AND

My younger brother and I were raised by a single, lesbian mom in the Bible Belt—a land where the second question¹ out of anyone's mouth is

"Where do ya'll go to church?"

My mom is a self-described Recovering Catholic.

I vividly remember the time she explained that we were

a-t-h-e-i-s-t-s.

As a sophisticated kid I knew what this *really* meant—we were *completely* fucked!

GODLESS IN THE DEEP SOUTH

We were *Gay and Godless* in the Deep South...

you could be killed for **a LOT** less.

¹The first question being "What's your family name?"

CHAPTER TWO

GOD, SAVE US

FROM THE PEOPLE

WHO BELIEVE IN YOU



In the mind of a budding atheist, there are two kinds of people in the world:

- 1. those who believe in God,** and
- 2. those who don't.**

And in this dichotomy of

BELIEVERS and NONBELIEVERS,

Jews are not so different from Christians, from Muslims...and so on.

They **ALL** believe in God and therefore fall into the believer camp, the God camp, the ***other*** camp.

So the first hurdle in my JIT² journey required grappling with the mysterious relationship between God and Judaism.

²*Jew in Training*

CHAPTER THREE

BARUCH ATAH I-DUNNO...

It's clear to me now that folks who are born Jewish don't have to believe in God.

(Imagine the decrease in membership!)

But it feels a little muddier for the JIT.

"So I'm to learn prayers and blessings to Adonai when I don't even believe in the guy?

Is this like bowing to the Buddha because there is no Buddha?

I mean, what exactly am I converting to, anyway? *A secular Judaism???"*

OY!

My Jew coach, Arik, set my mind at ease, clarifying that converting to Judaism isn't like converting to Christianity. There is no simple litmus test of stating whether or not you are a believer (thank God).

In Judaism you don't "Get Saved;" you

GET LITERATE.

You get
food
book
people
song
history
literate

and...

(here's the twist)

You then have the option to NOT believe
in ANY of it!

IS THIS SHEER MADNESS?!?
or
LIBERATED THINKING?

The savvy businesswoman in me asks,
"So *why* the big deal with converting
with no set deliverables?"

What exactly is it that's *wanted* from me?"

I've learned to let such uncertainties hang in
the air, and I commit to wrestling with these
meaningful questions in my future life as a Jew.

I figure—

What better way to be a good Jew?

There's a significant difference in *converting* and *converging* in the mind of a JIT. Let's look at the root words, shall we?

Convert (*verb*)

To (cause something or someone to) change in form, character, or opinion.

YIKES!

CHAPTER FOUR

And now for converge:

Converge (*verb*)

To incline toward each other; to tend to a common result.

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh...isn't that much better?

So in the world of **converging**,
My husband, Michael, and I
meet somewhere in between.

So here's where I turn to you,
my Beit Chesed,³
for support.

YOU SAY POTATO...

I ask that you hold both Michael and I
to the **convergence model**,
for this will support my blossoming as a Jew

and
Michael's blossoming as a...
Proud-Lesbian-Offspring-Buddhist-Cherokee
(tee hee)

³The traditional term here is Beit Din, House of Judgment. Our friend, Rabbi Dan Goldblatt, borrowed the term Beit Chesed, House of Loving Kindness, to shift the emphasis of this role from tribunal to ally.

CHAPTER FIVE

SHAKYAMUNI, THE BACKDOOR MAN

So Buddhism came in the backdoor and before I knew it, I was doing 10-day silent retreats biannually. Candy-coated as psychology and sometimes philosophy, I could take it in... and **EVERY OUNCE** I took in made my life better.

I'm infinitely thankful for stumbling upon the spiritual path of Buddhism, which will remain central to my life, even as a Jew.

But Buddhism is far from perfect. And its weaknesses *could be* described as some of Judaism's strengths. Where Buddhism lacks, Judaism shines, and perhaps the opposite is also true.

What other explanation do we have for the ABUNDANCE of self-described JewBus?!?⁴

What I appreciate most about Judaism is its dedication to family and community. I cherish the role Judaism has already played in earmarking time, space, and intention for me and Michael. And I look eagerly forward to how that will look when we have our own family.

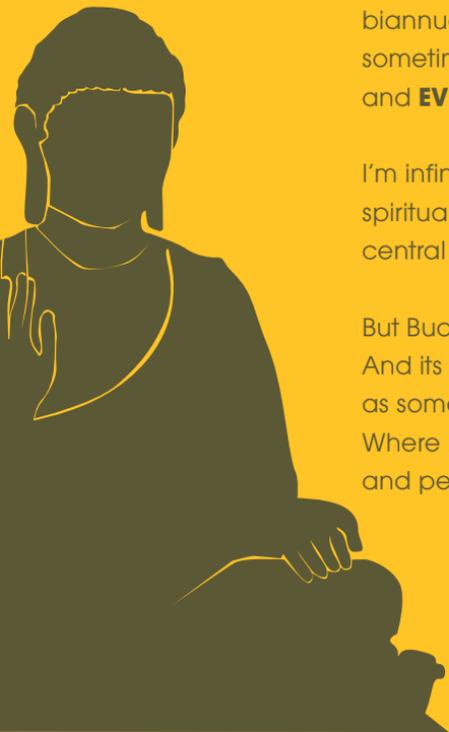
Buddhism is BRILLIANT in the realm of internal landscapes and in the BIG PICTURE of connecting us with all sentient beings.

But in my humble opinion it *can* leave us high and dry on matters of **friendship and family**.

Perhaps this is changing with Western Buddhism. My suspicion is that Jews will be the people responsible for breaking this ground....

Perhaps I'll be one of those groundbreaking Jews!

⁴Jewish Buddhists



CHAPTER SIX

THREE CHEERS FOR SHABBAT!

There are parts of Judaism that I took to like a fly to shit.⁵

Take Shabbat, for instance.

My first official date with Michael was a Shabbos dinner at his home.

I remember him thoughtfully explaining the rituals and blessings....

At the time, I thought, "So what's the catch?"

"If I understand you correctly, Michael, on Shabbat we

slow down,
reflect upon the week,
appreciate life,

REJOICE

with family and friends,
eat, drink, sing, and have sex, TWICE."

⁵ A favorite Southern expression



“AND WHY ISN'T EVERYONE DOING THIS ALREADY?!?”

This could be considered
the moment of conception for this JIT.
I was sold on the idea.

Like that Rumi poem:

*Lovers don't finally meet somewhere.
They're in each other all along.*

This is *not only* how I feel about Michael;
this is how I feel about Shabbat.

Shabbat was in me all along.
I was born to Shabbat!

CHAPTER SEVEN

4 OUT OF 5 SOUTHERN BELLES AGREE!

AMAZING!

I COME FROM A LONG LINE OF BATHERS.

Southern women don't shower, they *bathe*.

And like a *mikvah*,⁶ it's sort of a production.

Sometimes multiple women are involved.
You might get your hair brushed out.
You might have help boiling up the water.
Your tub might be smack-dab in the kitchen
and therefore kids are politely asked to

"Git the hell outta here before I take a switch to ya!"

It's sacred time.

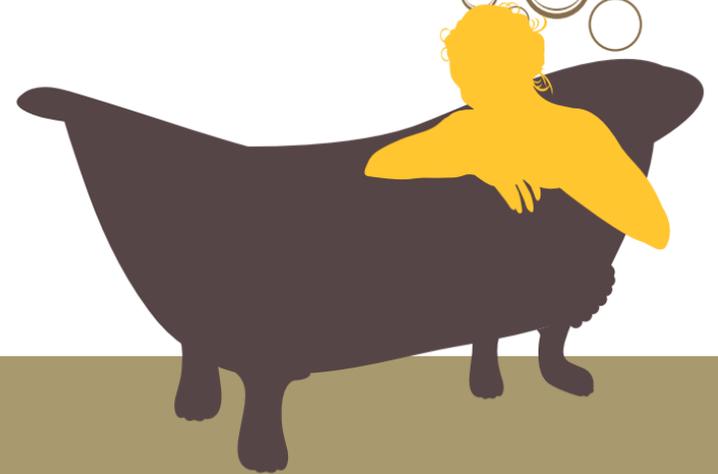
This isn't an everyday affair but more likely a weekly transition
out of hard labor and into family time.
It's one of my favorite of all Southern rituals.

Michael and I do a mikvah each Friday before Shabbat.
I absolutely love it.

Strangely enough it was only upon *reading* about
traditional mikvahs that I had any inkling of concern.

"What's this???
Mean mikvah ladies...implied impurities of menses..."

I gave Arik back his books and told him
I was better off *not* reading about mikvahs,
just experiencing them.



⁶ Mikvah (or mikveh) is a bath designed for the purpose of ritual immersion in Judaism.

Shabbat and mikvahs are already a big part of my life along with our monthly community gathering, Shir HaShirim.⁷ What I anticipate will **GROW** is the role and importance of the **Jewish holidays**.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ANYTHING FOR A GOOD PARTY



Keep in mind that I've only cycled through the Jewish calendar, ONCE.
I am, in essence, a toddler.

My first **Pesach** left guests crawling for the door—
weary from the world's most prolonged Haggadah.⁸

The build up of Elul to **Rosh Hashanah** seemed to drag on F-O-R-E-V-E-R
(although I DO love the notion of a second new year to get my act together).

Not one to skip meals—**Yom Kippur** was challenging and yet miraculous.
Sukkot was lovely too, but a blur after the High Holidays.

Hanukkah isn't big in Cuba yet....

And then there's **PURIM**.
NOW THERE'S A HOLIDAY!
Or so I've read
(we've actually never been in town for it).

So as time passes, I feel certain that the holidays will deepen in meaning.
And like those before us, Michael and I will create our own interpretations
for each ritual.

Events NOT to be missed!

⁷Literally translates to Song of Songs. A monthly gathering founded by my husband, Michael Ziegler, and Richard Kaplan to celebrate and weave together the musical liturgy of the Sephardic, Mizrachi, and Ashkenazic traditions.

⁸A book containing the narrative and order for the Seder service on Passover.

CHAPTER NINE

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Not long ago I told Arik that I didn't want to take a Hebrew name.

I'd HAD it with names!

A BRIEF CHRONOLOGY OF MY NAME

1970

Born and named Cheri Leigh Marecek. Called **Cheri Leigh**.

1977

Begin begging mother to change my first name.

1979

Hone in on the name **Candy**. Thankfully, my mother refuses to cave in, saving me from an almost certain career as a porn star.

1981

Move to Ohio. Determined to NOT sound Southern, I lose my accent and go by **Cheri** instead of **Cheri Leigh**.

1985

Mom gives me my Cherokee name, **Dancing Eyes**.

1989

Brother, Keith, takes his middle name, Roman, as a first name.

1994

Nearly change my first name to **Reah** (in reference to the sun) or **Jetty** (after my great grandmother) but can't decide between the two.

1995

Drop Cheri entirely; use **Leigh** as my first name.

2002

Brother, Roman, now a radio producer and host, changes his last name to **Mars**.

2004

Debate becoming a **Ziegler** like Michael or remaining **Marecek**. Neither name seems perfect... then it hits me;

Leigh Marz

A nod to my original name (Mar), a nod to Michael's name (Z), and, phonetically, a shared name with my brother (Mars).

YES!

So now that, *that's* out of the way...
Back to Hebrew names
(but you see why I was a little overwhelmed).

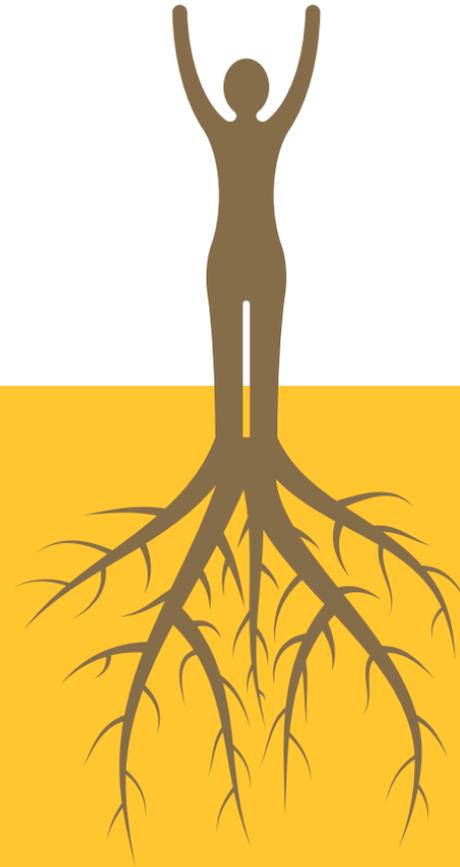
Michael assured me that it wasn't important to him that I take a Hebrew name and there was no family name of significance... I was at a loss.

Meanwhile, Arik was being SUPER patient
(and yet not letting me off the hook).

After much soul searching,
I came full circle
back to
Leigh or Li, when transliterated (as in Dodi Li).

**Li means "for me" in Hebrew.
Perfect!**

This name symbolizes a lot to me.
In my life as a Jew identifying what is authentic
for me will be important.
My name will hold me to that.



CHAPTER TEN

ANTI-SEMITISM: EXCUSE ME, WAITER. THIS ISN'T WHAT I ORDERED...

It seems a little funny to claim
"history of oppression" like job
experience—making me
suitable for the position of Jew.
But there *is* some truth here.

Our family never passed as normal.

And while Mom was the lesbian, we ALL lived in the closet.

We were once outed, and my mother had to fight for custody over my brother and me. And there were countless daily cruelties of homophobia, classism, racism and sexism that we, as a family, endured.

Then there's a phenomenon I've heard called **MULTIGENERATIONAL TRAUMA.**

What else can explain the sad eyes of my Cherokee ancestors?
The drinking and drugs? The poor health?
Or the fact that the eldest member of my family is 62?!?
(The second oldest is my mother, at 57.)

They/WE die young, usually by self-destructing.
Every time I think about it my heart breaks.



Multigenerational trauma wears a different face in the Jewish community... but also seems alive and well... How could it *not* be?

The concept isn't something you understand **in your mind.** It is something you know **in your bones.**

I don't think I could share my life with someone who couldn't comprehend this darker part of my being. Michael profoundly gets it.

But Michael and I aren't the first Jew-Okee^o couple to tango. My mom's partner of 12 years, Betty...she's Jewish.

I once asked Mom if their cultural differences were ever an issue. She said,

"What differences!?!"

We're both survivors!

We're both tribal!"

Now, this isn't all to say that an ADDED layer of anti-Semitism doesn't faze me.

I have wondered what anti-Semitism from the inside looks like.... I suspect that it will occasionally catch me off guard but, for the most part, will appear painfully familiar.

Whether strange or familiar,
Michael and I choose to
swim together in the reservoir of bliss
and suffering.



CONCLUSION

The journey of this JIT has been filled with many surprises. The magnitude of the decision and the unexpected gift uncovered far surpassed what I imagined.

I AM DEEPLY GRATEFUL TO BE WELCOMED INTO SUCH A RICH AND BEAUTIFUL CULTURE.

I relish how Judaism has deepened my connection with Michael, my spiritual practice, and my desire to know my own indigenous culture.

Thank you, Arik, for your sweetness and your boundless compassion.

Thank you, Rabbi Dan, for your validation and care.

Thank you Yael, Sharda, and Diane for bringing the sacred feminine to this ceremony and for being so welcoming to me all along.

Thank you, Michael, for being the best thing to ever happen to me, for sharing your full self, for meeting me somewhere in between.

*And to any of you who may have stumbled upon this unexpectedly...
THANK YOU for taking the time to share in this tale.*

MAY YOU BE WILDLY SUCCESSFUL IN WHEREVER LIFE'S TRAINING TAKES YOU!

