



Volume 10  
Issue 1  
2014

## The Jew in the Body

*S.L. Wisenberg*

I grew up in a religion in which my first prayers, when I was four, five, six—described experiences of the body. I memorized the Hebrew blessings recited upon seeing the light of the Sabbath candles, the blessings before eating bread and before drinking wine—or grape juice, as the case was. The nightly prayer my father taught me mentioned not the soul but the body, the senses. Hear, is the first word. Hear. Listen. The rest of that prayer, the Shema, has to do with remembering the words of God by signs on your arm and in front of your eyes. We are a literal people. Because of the words of this prayer my father would, during morning prayers, wrap the straps of his tefillin around his fingers and arm and around his head. The box goes on the arm so that we will remember that with a strong arm God took us out of Egypt. My father did not put on tefillin every weekday morning, like his grandfather (who had been a Hebrew teacher in the Old Country) did, or probably did, but my father knew how to lay tefillin, as it is said. And on Friday nights my father said the extended

kiddush following the prayer over the wine, a familiar paragraph that includes “zecher litsiat mitzrayim,” in memory of OUR liberation from Egypt. We remember our liberation from Egypt. And lest we think this liberation happened to someone else—our ancestors, for example, back in the days of the pyramids—all we had to do was wait around for Passover, where we would be reminded over and over that we were celebrating our own deliverance from slavery. We defied the words of Heraclitus, who said that a person could not step into the same river twice. Every Passover we stepped into the Red Sea, and every year, it parted.

Just to drive the point home once again, during one Passover in the 1970s our enthusiastic rabbi started dressing in white and leading his troops along the concrete-sided Braes Bayou in Houston, re-enacting the escape of the Jews, re-enacting what took place in Egypt, collapsing time. He did it the next year and the next, so that each year his congregants were following in their own footsteps, repeating their journey, from their liberation from Egypt, millennia ago.

An aside: Any talk about the Jewish body would be remiss without a mention of ritual purity—especially the laws regulating women’s bodies. Married women are supposed to immerse themselves in the mikvah after their periods. But since our family didn’t pay attention to these rules, I won’t go here. And if you look at any fundamental practice of religion, you will find restrictions and regulations about women’s bodies.

Along these lines, you may be shoring up an argument in your head that ALL religions address the body, and especially if you grew up with a crucifix in your bedroom or classroom, you grew up in a religion of the body, MORE of the body than Judaism. Furthermore, we're the ones who dismiss the body of Christ and all its torments and miraculous feats. Indeed, a standard Yiddish expression of skepticism is, "Nisht geshtoygen, nisht gefloygen"—which means, "it didn't climb, it didn't fly." "It" refers to Jesus, made inanimate not out of disrespect but in order to throw off the goyim, non-Jews, so they wouldn't have the slightest excuse for violent retaliation. Jesus: not the son of God, not, according to us, the lord made flesh.

You could argue—the ritual bath aside—that we are the people of everything BUT the body, considering our Biblical heroes who keep breaking idols, and Judaism's lack of statues, and until recently, our lack of depiction of bodies on stained glass. It might be true that we're the ultimate dismissers of the body, and maybe that was true for a long time. Except.

In Sunday School, where we learned our history and occasionally talked about ethics, we talked about a different kind of Jewish body, not the ones that recite a blessing upon making light or on smelling sweet Havdalah spices, or the ones that feel in their bones the liberation of the Exodus—but the unmoving and disappeared Jewish bodies from another decade and another continent. Jews are enjoined from worshipping graven images, but that is what post-war Jewry

has done, worshiping at the shrine of Auschwitz, worshiping our second cousins twice removed, whom we never knew, who didn't get on the boat with our grandparents in 1910, and who couldn't get on a ship in 1939. Theirs was the road not taken, theirs was our true destiny—avoided. Our six-million martyrs and saints. Unlike the Catholics we don't pray to our saints. Instead we beg their forgiveness—

For living.

We weep for them.

We procreate for them.

We are grateful—because they gave us an essential ingredient in the American post-melting pot. They gave us victimhood.

And in the early 1960s, as a near-sighted eight-year-old girl, who had had asthma since she was only a few days old, I knew that without my glasses and my asthma medicine, if, or when—it was just a matter of when—I was taken away to a concentration camp, I would die immediately.

As I was meant to.

Because of this, or concurrent with this, THIS being the communal burden of the Holocaust, and THIS being furthermore the personal burden of asthma, the burden of self-consciousness that was brought early to my breathing—which should be an unconscious, easy, untrammelled and unnoisy practice—here has been a voice inside me since always. A voice from my body, a silent voice inside my body, since always, telling me: You do not deserve to live.

The voice says, You wouldn't have survived the camps. If your parents couldn't afford your medicine, if they couldn't afford the therapy machine you use for breathing, you would be dead. And why do you deserve the machine, the medicine? It is only money that keeps you alive and what did you do to deserve that money? The voice says that the artificial, the manmade, is keeping me standing and breathing and seeing, that so much has been given over to keeping me alive, that it is unfair, it is simply too much, too much, that too much of the everything of the world is being used to keep me breathing.

The voice asks: How do you justify all that has collected around you to keep you alive, except to devote your life to the care of others, to the welfare of others, you must sacrifice yourself, all of what makes you you because what you have you don't deserve. You will never deserve it—IT being your life—so that the making of art is out of the question; its utility has not been proven. If what you deserve is to die, then you don't deserve to be a writer.

So is it any wonder I write about the six million?



I know a woman who works with torture survivors. She says that trauma lodges in the spinal cord, is carried from generation to generation (in Hebrew, *l'dor va dor*). So is this voice, one that has travelled up and down the DNA ladders, did this voice originate in our enemies, the Cossack and

the priest and the czar? In the haters of Jews? Is this the self-hating Jewish voice? I am often too tired to fight this voice. The battle over the voice is a battle over my life, my writing life. The voice is strangling the muse. The voice is the muse.

To have something in you that seeks to destroy you. Like an autoimmune disease. Like asthma, mine since infancy. Furthermore for 24 years (pre-Prozac) I had a lump in my throat, a tightness around my neck. The only other person I've met who had this symptom said to me, sadly, slowly, matter of factly, My grandmother tried to strangle me. That's why I feel this. But I did not have such a grandmother or grandfather or such parents. This death's grip is metaphorical. And real. And from within. And without. It is as real as the fresh lamb's blood we painted on our doors in the slave quarters in Egypt so that the Angel of Death would pass over our houses. It is as stark and real as the identity cards that the French government required all its Jews to fill out in 1940.

Call it a dark star hiding in my blood. It leads me to contemplate other deaths—in El Salvador, Nicaragua, the antebellum South. In Auschwitz, Terezin. Come see the wooden shelf that was your deserved bed.

Before Dachau, before Buchenwald, before Kristallnacht, there was Kishinev, the site of a pogrom, in 1903, a massacre in present day Moldova that the authorities allowed, encouraged, did nothing to stop. Afterwards, help was sent from around the world. Reports were gathered. Hands were wrung. My grandfather remembered,

as a little boy, pouring oil from the walls of his house in Kishinev, pouring hot oil down upon the heads of the marauders. My grandfather died before I was born, and I am named for him. My name was born in a city that became famous for tragedy.

Sadness walks through my bones.

Jacob wrestles with an angel, with himself.

Afterwards Jacob is renamed. He is too exhausted to do more than tell the story. He does not know if it is a good story or a bad story, a story for children or for angels or for the merchants of death. The angel who wrestles me is death and he comes every day, every hour. What the angel wants from me is bigger than death. He wants to be made to stop killing.

I am afraid that this voice will take me over. But all I have is this voice, all I am is this voice. I forget that I have the prayers too, the blessings, to acknowledge the miracles: of light, of food, of wine. Of good company. The pleasures of the body. I forget that the pleasures of the body can save me. That words of appreciation can save me. That passion can move inside the body, from the body, about the body, through the body. That words can chart its movement. Past and present and present and NOW.

S.L. Wisenberg is the author of *Holocaust Girls: History, Memory & Other Obsessions*, *The Sweetheart is In*, *The Adventures of Cancer Bitch*, and the forthcoming *Moments in Selma & Other Glimpses of the South (with more Jews than you would think)* from the University of Georgia Press. Email: [SLwisenberg@sbglobal.net](mailto:SLwisenberg@sbglobal.net)