

Stories From the Diaspora

He Clothed Me with Garments of Salvation (Isaiah 61:7)

My name is Miryam Leah. I was born in 1973 – Jewish, Italian, from an ultra-orthodox hassidic family (lubavitch – my father is the *shaliach*, the “sent one” of the Rebbe), and now, since December 21st, 2000, a Catholic and Dominican sister.

My conversion is in the first place a wound, and then - but only then - an encounter. It is a death followed by light. A death to my way of thinking, of acting, a death to what I used to have. But above all, it is a death to my people who no longer recognize me, to my family, which has cut off all communication with me, accusing me of idolatry, of betrayal, of antisemitism, of having murdered and tortured again my grandparents (all dead at Auschwitz; only my grandmother returned, but she later committed suicide). All of my entourage, whether religious or not, attack me and say that I am no longer one of them, that I have passed over to the enemy, into the camp of those who have at all times caused suffering to the Jewish people. They say that I have lost my soul and no longer have a right to the world to come. They think of my story as madness. Sheer madness.

I was told that a conversion doesn't fall upon you just like that. It is the tracing of a pencil held in the hand, which draws lines somewhat blindly because one is too close to the paper to see what one is drawing. And so if I reread my past I notice that I was drawing my conversion in the child and in the woman that I was and that I am. It was waiting for me.

Always worried, always searching for something that seemed to be missing, I did not want to believe that the relationship with Hashem passed only through the Law, that one could be a great *lamdam* (student) and never encounter Hashem. Ever since my birth I had heard the rabbis say that to love was to observe the Law. But I, on the contrary, saw love as a personal relationship, a unique calling. It seemed to me that we, the Jews, yes - we scrupulously observed the Law, but it was as if we tried to get even with Hashem. In my prayers, therefore, I asked the Most High to grant me the experience of a relationship as the one that our Fathers had, to grant me to speak to Him “as a man speaks with his friend.” This is what I wanted.

One September day, in 1995, I had just finished my military service in Israel and I found a small pocket Gospel in English on the seashore in the Galilee.

I began to read here and there, by sheer curiosity, and I still remember the impression that I had: it was as if a veil was being ripped and a whole interior life was suddenly awakened.

It is difficult to explain how one arrives to an inner certainty because this certainty is a grace, and grace has no explanation. I read the Gospel all at once and I KNEW, deep within myself, that the One of whom I was reading was the Messiah. There He was, alive. He was calling me by name. He was surrounding me with an infinite love. It was

as if I had discovered a door within myself. I had turned the doorknob and a flow of light, warm and radiant, had submerged me. It was a Sunday. Throughout the week I could only think of Him - supreme madness of Love who gives Himself to men and women - of Him who had spoken to me as if I were the only one in the universe. It was as if I were drunk.

Of course, I did not know any Christians, but only Jews like me, lubavitchers, and so I did not follow up on this initial impression. In any case, I was too shaken, and I think that the time was not yet ripe. The following Sunday I returned to Italy.

There, I returned to my habitual life with its strict religious practices, its multitude of commandments which covered all aspects of my existence. The inner experience on the seashore remained as a small pebble in the shoe as one walks. You try to get rid of it but it seems to always remain there, troublesome... Once I was surrounded by my own people, I pushed away every memory of “that man” (I could not even bring myself to pronounce his Name with determination), so great was the fear of blaspheming. I preferred to not awaken these impressions, but what bothered me the most was the fact of not being able to stop thinking about Him, and especially that His Presence, despite all my efforts, gave me an ineffable peace. It carried me towards unimaginable and marvellous horizons of freedom, of love, of impulse towards the future - a new openness.

During that period, every time I returned to Israel and I happened to see anything that was Christian, I felt within



myself a sort of a strength, a fresh power that threw me out of myself, of my small narrow world, and made me see everything with different eyes. All this fascinated me but I was afraid. To calm my sense of guilt, therefore, I threw myself into the minute observance of the Law. I allowed myself no weakness, no softness, no respite. But the more I engaged myself upon this path of a combatant, the more I seemed to miss the essential thing and the more I seemed to die slowly, suffocated. It was a failure on all fronts. In addition, there was the battle against prejudice - the suspicion and the contempt that we, the Jews, often have towards anything that does not belong to us and towards Christians in particular: for us, we must admit it, the world is often divided into two - on the one hand the Jews (the just) and on the other the goyim (the gentiles).

Still, despite everything the Spirit was working in me without respite.

Finally, after almost two years of inner conflict, a rather banal event urged me to move forward: at the end of a Shabbat that I spent with my cousins and a young hassid, their friend, my mother came to tell me before I went to bed: "You know, Miryam, this young man, we know his parents, we have met them." I remained silent, waiting for the rest. "They are very good people, very religious, and also he is a Cohen. He has spoken to us, and your father has asked me to tell you that he is willing to give you his blessing." I froze. Without realizing it I thought "Jesus!" - calling Him by name within me for the first time - "how could I live my life without You? How could I live far away from You?"

From that moment on, I don't know how, I was seized by the desire to know Jesus. I wanted to know everything about Him. It had now become a question of life or death. My parents still did not know anything. I first began to read works about converted Jews. How did they go from Judaism to Catholicism? As I read them I realized that they could not answer my questions because they had never practised Judaism. Almost all of them had been atheists, or they had spent their childhood with Christians. I therefore understood that I was a pioneer upon this thorny path. If I wanted to arrive (where? I did not know that either, it seemed that I was being "carried"), I had to blaze a trail on my own. If I wanted to grasp the thread of this continuity which every Christian claims and every Jew denies, I had to revisit everything from the start. I had to go back 2,000 years, in Israel, at the time of Christ. And I knew that this link did exist because the story of Christ is a Jewish story, and there have always been Jews, ignorant and learned, who had recognized Him as Messiah at the risk of their lives. Little by little, I began to introduce myself to the life of Jesus and of his disciples, in his words, his actions, his thoughts. I immersed myself in the Gospels. I searched the internet. I studied the New Testament, comparing it with the Old. I read all kinds of works about Jesus and about

the history of the early Church. Gradually, despite the total lack of systematic research, I was beginning to discover a new world, fascinating and astonishing, which had until then remained totally unknown to me.

Yes, Jesus was really the Messiah. Really He had given a new Torah, a world of peace which one finds within oneself and not outside (this will come too, I think, but only at His second coming). Truly He was the son of the Elohim of Avraham, Itshak and Yaakov. Everything had been clearly announced by the prophets! He was the Messiah and had brought a new Torah, as our Masters taught us, in continuity with the one which we had, yet at the same time which surpasses all of us.

I was delirious with joy.

My parents thought that I had fallen in love with the young Cohen.

I knew that Jesus was asking something of me but I did not yet have the courage to listen to Him, to let go of the handrail and to throw myself at Him. I researched and researched but was not reaching anything. I was at an impasse. It is said that the small line that goes from the head to the heart is the longest of all. This is true. Finally, one day, exhausted and tired, I surrendered and entered into a church. It was the time of the Mass. I sat in the back, I closed my eyes and said: "Jesus, after all my searching I don't understand anything anymore. So You have to speak to me. What do you want me to do?"

It is at this moment that I met Father Michel.

He was coming out of the sacristy, ready to celebrate Mass. He approached me and asked me to read the reading. Terrified, I replied that no, I could not read, not at all, I was Jewish, hassidic, not baptized, and for the first time in a church. I was searching but could not find; I wanted to know Jesus, live for Him, soak in His love for the rest of my life, but I did not know how. He looked at me and smiled, then he asked me whether I could wait for him until the end of Mass. I simply said "yes" to him. At the same time, I felt completely surrounded by the love of Jesus and there I made the decision to be a true Jew, that is to become Christian, to recognize Jesus as Messiah of Israel, announced by the prophets and promised by the Eternal One, blessed be He, since the beginning of time.

I began to regularly go to his home after leaving the office (I was working as a computer engineer). With much patience, kindness and sensitivity he helped me to penetrate more and more the spirit of the Christian faith, its source of life, and its gifts. He died a year later but I was then already more or less integrated into the local Dominican community.

Still, it took me three years until I received baptism and decided to leave everything to follow the Messiah of Israel as a Dominican sister. Years of joy and of new life, of extraordinary horizons and of "shalom", but also

years of desert, of silence, of cold, with many questions without answers: Why me? Why not someone more educated, more capable, more intelligent, more this or more that? Yes, because conversion is not to make progress; it is a transformation. It is about going through successive deaths to arrive at the summit. Our life is made of paschal decisions that make us come out of our slaveries. I saw a parallel with the hassidic teaching: this existence is for the sake of preparing the eternal Shabbat, where we will live only from what we have prepared here, down below, with our actions and our prayers, in the same way that we only eat on the Shabbat what we have prepared on Friday.

Indeed, on my way of conversion, I hesitated much: the fear of following foreign gods was always present, the thousands of things that I did not understand, the Holy Spirit, the Trinity, and all the practices that seem to me blasphemous, such as processions with statues. And then there was the constant searching for landmarks in my Jewish tradition: I confronted everything, and if I did not find connections, I doubted. In addition, there was the fear of being rejected by my people, of losing my identity, of not being accepted by Catholics, of being considered "different."

Above all, as a millstone, there was the terror of hurting those that I loved, my family.

And at every stop on the road, with every doubt, every trial, I said - and continue to say to myself: Ok. Ok for this step, for this doubt, for these tears... I accept because I must go until the end, hold firm, drink until the last drop, climb the mountain until the top.

At the end, I knew and know it, there is light and life.

Why me? It was and remains incomprehensible. But if I reread my past, and these days in particular, I know that it was not by my strength that I took this step, but I was upheld by His hand and His infinite love. He fought for me, in my place. At the moment when He asked me to choose, to reveal myself, to cross my river of Jabbok (Gen 32:22), to face my family and my people, His calling was so strong, so irresistible that I could only answer yes, *hinneni* (here I am!). He spoke directly to my heart, He said that He was thinking of me to not become mad from the pain on the cross. He gave me His own strength; He freed me from the snare of death. Every day He fills me with His tenderness like never before in my life. With patience He is teaching me to open my heart to others, welcoming them in me indiscriminately because only there is found true happiness. It is in order to live out the resurrection already given here and now, in obedience to Jesus the Messiah of Israel, that I became Christian.

The way to freedom in Jesus in His Body, the Church, is still long, and even though I know that I cannot remain entangled in my past, Jewish culture continues to be a part me. I was born and grew in it, and it is not always easy to

find the key to integration. Sometimes I still have trouble with some of the Church's sacraments, with food, work and moving on the Shabbat, to pronounce the Name, blessed is He, as do the Christians. Sacred images still disturb me (only a few months ago I agreed to keep a small image of the Trinity). At the celebration of the Passion I still have not succeeded in kneeling before the cross because I still perceive this gesture as idolatry. I still dress up beginning with the right side, I never eat anything without having said the blessing and without having ritually washed my hands. Sometimes, without the support of the Law, I still feel disoriented and I am afraid to make mistakes. I am still ill at ease if I cannot observe the Jewish fasts (Yom Kippur, Esther) or if I do not read the *parashot*, week by week. I still shiver when I see the Torah treated like any other book, and I still feel a sharp sting when one attacks the Jews... and I could go on.

Since I arrived in France, the Eternal One, blessed be He, in His great tenderness, has put on my path a person who is helping me, also with patience, sensitivity, understanding and humour, without pressing me but always inviting me to move forward, to integrate my Jewish being in the Christian faith, to let myself be moulded by Jesus. Little by little he is helping me to discover more and more the beauty and the richness of my identity, and at the same time I am experimenting the overabundance of joy and the depth of what comes from the Christian faith. He is walking with me and together we are seeking how I can be Christian without denying or abandoning anything of my Jewish identity but rather accomplish it in its fullness. On a very small scale, I sometimes like to think that we are reflecting the primitive Church, Jewish and Gentile Catholics, all walking together to become "fulfilled" in Jesus.

I am persuaded that Jesus, through the Christian faith, is asking me to make a step of responsibility and of personal freedom absolutely more dynamic and true than the scrupulous observance of the *mitzvot* and to the Rebbe, but absolutely more demanding. I prefer this path a thousand times more because this is the path of love, and love brings you directly to the depth of yourself, where your truth is found in Him, where you can look at yourself and at everyone with His eyes, where there is the Place, the *makom*, there where we can join ourselves with the *Shekhinah* face to face. The Torah is a bit like a master. It can only lead you to the doorstep of the Kingdom, but after, from this point on, you can only enter into the Palace through Jesus the Messiah. The decision to abandon ourselves to Him, to bet our life on Him and to let ourselves be led belongs to us. He invites us but allows us to remain free.

He fills us with His love and asks us to do like Him. His love also means to choose to remain open, to let oneself be wounded: to me, this means above all the suffering of the rupture with my family, the nostalgia of my people, the pain of seeing them still outside of the True Light, of the

Promised Land, all still closed up in the Law. Nevertheless, the election of the Eternal, blessed be He, is irrevocable. In His mercy He chose Israel, and His choice is a creative act of love for the sake of love, and so I am convinced that the Jewish people will one day recognize that Jesus is the Messiah, because He is love itself. I know. I experience this love every day.

And now... why am I a *Catholic for Israel*? Because a *Catholic for Israel* calls and invites the sons and daughters of Israel to come to the foot of the Cross, and the Chris-

tians to go to meet them, as the father of the prodigal son. I think again about this injunction of Devarim (Deuteronomy): *Choose life!* The rabbis explain to us: choosing life is choosing to observe the Law. For me, in Jesus and in His Body, the Catholic Church, I have discovered that to choose life is simply choosing to be open, to allow ourselves to be wounded and permeated by another than oneself, to love as the Elohim of Israel has loved His people by giving us His only begotten Son, Jesus the Messiah.

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Simi Cohen: Gibraltarian, Jewish, Nun

by Fernando Poyatos, Professor Emeritus,
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On Saturday, March 1, 1817, when she was supposed to attend the Gibraltar synagogue, a 16-year-old Hebrew girl "with beautiful black eyes and a sweet, piercing look in her eyes," left her well-to-do family ("with only a shirt under my arm", she would recall), managed to cross the town wall unmolested, and then took off her shoes and hurried along a sandy Spanish beach to the nearest town of La Línea de la Concepción. From there a kindly man took her on his mount to the town of San Roque, perched on a hill, where, after spending two months with a family, she was taken fifteen miles inland to the ancient town of Medina Sidonia, also high on hill.

Simi had been born during the Holy Week of March 1801 to the Hebrew couple of rabbi Jacob Cohen and Esther Levi (who died giving birth to Simi), of Spanish noble ancestry from Spain since the time their unsuspected Messiah was crucified in Jerusalem. Being, as today, part of a prosperous Jewish community, the Cohens, who imbued their daughter with the love of God, could only find Christian Spanish women as servants. One of them, "at my asking," she would recall in a letter written as an elderly woman, "would speak to me of the life of the Christians, their sacraments and their mysteries, and inspire in me the love and veneration for the Most Blessed Virgin. With her I would pray the Holy Rosary in secret places, always commending myself to the Divine Lady,

that she would grant me the grace to be a good Christian ... For as long as I can remember, Christianity was the only religion I believed in."

Although prevented from learning to write and read for not wanting to learn Hebrew and follow Judaism, her servant brought her a primer, which her father and stepmother soon found and destroyed because it bore a cross. She refused to attend the synagogue, but her maid took her twice to Our Lady of Europe, at the farthest end of the Rock. There she consecrated herself to Mary and offered to bear her name; and since the maid wore, as a promise, a scapular with Mary's heart pierced by swords, she promised to call herself María de los Dolores ('of the Sorrows')

and retire from the world, "if the Most Blessed Virgin would bring me to Spain and prevent me from offending God."

The local bishop sent her to Medina Sidonia with a kindly man who denied having being accompanied part of the journey by a handsome young man riding beside her, as she insisted he did (while she just prayed to Mary all the way). This made the vicar conclude: "My daughter, that was Saint Raphael who came with you."

When, still quite exhausted from her very rough journey from San Roque, she was being prepared for Baptism at Medina Sidonia, the Archbishop of Cadiz and Algeciras, Msgr. Juan Acisclo de Vera y Delgado, said: "There's no need to teach her but about the Son, for she already knows the Father." To which Simi quickly replied: "It's because I know *Him* that I've been looking for Him." Her maid back home had been an excellent



An idealized portrait of Simi Cohen

Picture is from web site article: *1802 Simi Cohen* at: http://gibraltar-intro.blogspot.com/2012/01/chapter-2_20.html