A Religious Writer's Dilemma [1]

December 15, 2014 Writing and Faith [2]

Theme Essay by Ruth Carmel

Going Through the Motions—with Faith and Writing



I'm an Orthodox Jew, born and bred; I went to religious schools from age four to eighteen. For observant Jews, Judaism is a religion of action at least as much as belief, so I do my best to keep the *mitzvot*, the laws that govern every aspect of life: from prayers at waking and bedtime—to fast days and feasts—to dozens of blessings: upon hearing thunder, seeing a rainbow, drinking a fine wine, new life, new death.

As all-encompassing as my religion is, until very recently I was sure it had nothing to do with my writing. I've learned to compartmentalize. If I'm writing for a secular publication, I don't feel comfortable talking about my faith. For one thing, I fear that Orthodox practices, if ineptly presented, may have a whiff of the *shtetl*.

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But my biggest challenge comes in writing for Orthodox readers. I have too many questions about my faith to feel confident writing about it. And I think that would show. I think readers would sense something is not quite right.

I put on a good front for my children*. Will I be punished for bad things I do?* one asks. *Why do bad things happen?* asks the other. Beats me, I think, but I'm not about to overwhelm my kids with my own confusion. So, I answer the tough ones with an air of calm assurance: *G-d is merciful, He gives us second chances, you're good kids, everything will be fine.* I think you sometimes have to fake confidence for your children. And regardless of my own questions, I want my kids to be Orthodox, to believe in a Creator who loves them. I want them to understand the good in following the commandments of the Torah, that these laws guide and enrich their lives.

That said, I wish I had the constant, solid certainty that there is a master plan for my own life. I wish I had the comfort of knowing, unquestioningly, that there are reasons. Part of me doesn't understand how I could feel like this. Brilliant minds throughout Jewish history—men who delved into the holy books, women who knew all the psalms by heart, people of great insight into human nature—have had complete faith. My intelligence pales beside theirs. And yet, I struggle. These days, the beliefs of my youth sometimes feel like assumptions.

Some years ago, I told a coworker that I did overtime on Sundays because I couldn't come in to work on Saturdays. I remember my shock when she said, "So you choose to observe the Sabbath." Her voice was mild, but she said it in a tone meant to correct me, and I felt a distinct stillness as the comment reverberated. It was the first time I'd thought of my practices that way. I realized then that the foundation of who I am might be seen by others as a choice among other possible choices. And although her comment didn't shake my devotion to keeping the Sabbath, I couldn't lose the unsettling new feeling that my choices—to believe as I do and to hold onto the practices tied to my faith—were not inevitable.

It was easier when I was growing up. The adults always told me everything would turn out all right, as I do with my kids. I was lucky enough to have two loving, protective parents so that even when things weren't all that great—when money was tight, when an emergency erupted—I could believe the problem would ultimately be solved with a happy ending. Then I got older and learned that the teachings of my faith don't ensure a happy ending. Instead, we get a necessary, divinely ordained ending.

But I don't like thinking everything has a reason, because if there is a reason, I want to know it. And don't tell me to trust. When someone says, "Trust me," I check to make sure no one's stealing my iPhone. Jewish theology acknowledges that people have a choice in what they do—but have you noticed things have a better chance of turning out for the best if you don't choose wrong?

Of course, I'm a foxhole believer. In a family crisis, you'll find me chanting psalms. It's just in day-to-day life that I sometimes feel untethered and unsure.

Which is why I can't write about my faith. I would love to concoct a good, soppy story for an Orthodox publication that gets readers to think, as they grope for the tissues, "Wow, so true." I'd like to present my religion in a good light to a secular audience, showing Orthodox women as the modern, intelligent people they are, notwithstanding the skirts covering the knee and wigs covering the hair. But presenting my experience to any audience as an example of a life religiously led would make me feel like the Wizard of Oz, the fake behind the curtain.

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Still, even if I choose not to write about my faith, it colors my work. While I was writing this essay, I told a good friend about it, insisting—at first—that my beliefs just don't enter into my writing.

"Of course they do," she said. "What about the piece for that magazine?"

She meant an Orthodox magazine that had recently published an essay of mine—one I hadn't expected they would take because it didn't seem Jewish enough. It's about a minor slight I suffered when I was a kid and why I still remember it. I conclude there that I need to work on remembering the good in my life more than the problems.

"What about it?" I asked.

"The fact that you reflected on it at a time of year when we do this kind of introspection," she said, "has everything to do with your beliefs."

So much for what I knew about myself. The essay had come out right before Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, the culmination of a forty-day period in which Jews examine their deeds of the past year and atone for their misdeeds. The editor who accepted my essay obviously thought it was appropriate for publication during such a solemn time.

Later, I realized the catch. I submitted the essay two months before it was published, and I didn't connect it to Yom Kippur. But then I looked at the calendar and found that the timing still supported my friend's theory: I'd written the essay during an even more somber time, the weeks of mourning preceding the ninth day of the Jewish month of Av, a

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fast that commemorates the destruction of the ancient First Temple in Jerusalem. The mood of those days had triggered my self-reflective essay.

Ironic as it is, I now know my faith is so ingrained in me that it invariably shows up in my writing.

I've been working on a memoir forever (okay, on and off for three years). It's mostly about having a child on the autism spectrum. The memoir has been taking so long because there are parts of my life I don't like to think about. But they're the good stuff. Not good in the sense of "terrific, I'm so glad that happened just the way it did," but good to read about—emotionally resonant, if awful. The memoir would never be worth reading if I didn't question the way some things happened, if I simply assumed that what seems overwhelmingly challenging is really part of a greater good. And yet, it won't be readable if I don't try to get meaning out of the experience of having a special-needs child.

Is it hypocritical to keep practicing as an Orthodox Jew, even when I'm just not feeling the pull? Nah. Admittedly, it's not optimal. Observant Jews aren't supposed to be doing the *mitzvot* on autopilot. Nevertheless, we're taught to follow the teachings of the Torah whether or not we feel inspired, because we're influenced by our actions.

Or to use the vernacular: Fake it till you make it.

Writers offer the same advice about writing. There are mountains of quotes out there, but one of my favorites comes from Raymond Carver, when he was referring to the impact of another author's words on him: "Isak Dinesen said that she wrote a little every day, without hope and without despair. I like that."

So, I make time and space to write, even when the spirit doesn't move me. And I keep the laws an Orthodox woman should keep, even when it's just a fallback to the familiar. My faith is there for me, whether or not I'm feeling particularly faithful at a particular moment. It's like going to a party with my husband when I'm annoyed with him. I might stalk across the room and pretend to flirt with a cute bartender, but it's comforting to know the link between me and my beloved can spool out a long way. After all, we both know he's the guy I'm going home with.

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Publishing Information

- "Raymond Carver, The Art of Fiction No. 76," [4] interviewed by Mona Simpson and Lewis Buzbee, *Paris Review*, Summer 1983. Carver also refers to this quote by Dinesen in "A Storyteller's Shoptalk" [5] by Raymond Carver, *New York Times*, February 15, 1981.

Art Information

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Ruth Carmel—a pseudonym—is a lawyer and writer who lives in New York with her husband and children. In her previous TW essay, "Why I Write About My Family," [8] she makes clear why she’s using a pseudonym. For another example of the way religion ends up in her work, see "My Big Fat Orthodox Thanksgiving," [9] Ruth's recent essay in *Alimentum*. As she's realized, "That's part of my life, so it's just going to be there."

TW is also delighted to announce that Ruth Carmel is the winner of the 2014 Talking Writing Prize for Advice Writing.

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