

## **Jewish Postpaks – By Hayley Katzen**

Every April, every October, my rural postmaster presents me with the large cardboard postpak. Contents: FOOD. Inside I find honey, apples, matzah, teiglach and kneidlach - in a packet! This is the Jewish mother's subtle reminder to the lesbian daughter - 'I will miss you at the seder'; 'Try not to ring on Yom Kippur'.

My mother keeps the postmaster busy. Kneidlach now arrive all year...add to Mrs Campbells' tinned chicken soup and I have instant Jewish comfort. How my great auntie Bessie would shudder! And yartzheit candles come too. Every year, for 12 years, my Jewish self has made a brief appearance to light the yartzheit candle on the eve of the anniversary of my Dad's death. The only Jewish custom I continue to observe religiously. The flame, the quiet stillness, the focussed love and thought give me a sad but comforted peace. In that moment I am also connected to my self of all those previous years when I performed this ritual, to all the years when I watched my mother perform this ritual for her parents, her brothers and to all the other Jews world-wide who honour dead loved ones in this way. But my postmaster is busy because the candles come not only for me. I pass them on to my non-Jewish friends who grieve a death...a lesbian partner, a father, a mother, a husband, a child. Such a beautiful and helpful ritual.

Despite her diligence with the kneidlach, my mother's favourite Jewish parcels are of a literary type...Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*; Linda Grant....Jewish authors talking of their experiences, of the diaspora, of the culture I know and of Zionism,. And then there is the news of family and friends in South Africa, the 'do you remember so and so, he died last week. And so and so - their daughter had a baby'....' Jewish geography, Jewish news. I do wonder how my story is represented in the South African Jewish grapevine!

These have been the limits of my Australian Jewishness. I have made some hesitant attempts. I diligently joined the local Jewish community organisation - even in rural New South Wales such groups exist. I read the 4 page newsletter from cover to cover. I can taste the food described in the recipe section. Sometimes I shudder at the jokes. Always I hope that my memory of Jewish ritual and history will be triggered. What did I learn all those years ago at Cheida when I went three times a week to prepare for a batmitzvah? What was Purim about - apart from lots of noise and costumes; what do all those things on the Pesach table signify?

With each newsletter comes a notice about a festival, a gathering, a social event. I try to imagine what it would be like...should I ask my non-Jewish partner to join me? Is it the internalised anti-semitism that keeps me away? Or is it my fear of homophobia or perhaps my own internalised homophobia? Question after question in true Jewish fashion....I haven't yet made it to a seder or a gathering, maybe next time...

Every few years I return to South Africa and revel in the Friday night of loving almost-family Jewish warmth. Covering my eyes and saying the prayers over the candles with my dear friends, mentally citing the Kiddish as the man of the house reads it, relishing the sweetness of the kitkah bread, the round of hugs and kisses, and well wishes for the next week 'Have a good week darling, it's so lovely to have you here with us again.' It has been a long time away from the deliciousness of Jewish family warmth for me.

Like most Jewish South African families, we observed the High Holy days. There was the endless Pesach seder where we trawled through the Hagadah. How proud I was the first time I asked the four questions. I loved the nutty Charoset, hated the boiled egg in salt water and endless unintelligible hebrew prayers. But I loved the singing at the end of the meal and stealthily laughing and playing with my almost-family companions amidst the gravity of the service. Then there was the joy of Rosh Hashanah with its brief prayers and delighted welcoming in of the new year. Always large white clothed tables of people I loved, of other children and endless delicious food. And the fast! How I begged to do it as a very young girl. It seemed so significant to be part of the adult group who ate their sunset meal before heading for the haunting sounds of the Kol Nidrei service and then spending 24 hours without food or water. Fasting equalled adulthood for me. Even in our rebellious teens, when we avoided shul and lounged around reading Asterix, nothing would have persuaded us to break the fast before the sunset banquet.

Apart from these almost taken-for-granted Jewish traditions, I directed my own interest in Jewishness. To my mother's horror, I demanded that we as a family had Shabbat dinner. I demanded the right to a batmitzvah in the reform synagogue - that way I could run the service as my step-brothers had done. Never having attended a Jewish school I learned Hebrew, attended Cheida twice a week and on Saturdays and had to skip the odd school outing because the batmitzvah drew ever closer. The day came and onto the bimah I invited my Aryan looking friends to participate in the service. For a year or so after the batmitzvah I attended talks at the Rabbi's home every week. Then I lost interest. Perhaps I had only wanted to perform after all.

Everything else then became more important than Judaism...but I continued to sink into the comfort of the familiar almost-family Friday night gathering; to obediently fast and then feast and to announce to my non-Jewish friends that I was taking the day off school because it was a Jewish holiday. There was no question that I was Jewish - and most South Africans I encountered had an awareness about Jews. At University, demonstrating against the apartheid state alongside PLO supporters I began to question my grandmother's committed Zionism, my father's involvement in the seven day war. The politics of the State of Israel made little sense to me...but I was always a proud Jew, always observed the festivals a little.

Something changed when I migrated to Australia, when I came out as a lesbian. For my first year in Australia, when I was still mourning the recent death of my dad, I said Kaddish in the local reform synagogue every Friday night. The regulars would often look quizzically at this strange young woman

who could read hebrew, knew the prayers and had a good weep every Friday night - all alone. After the service I slipped away - not to a Shabbat dinner but to my new world - a smokey dykey pub or a kitchen table of beer and feminist chat. So far away from the white clothed and candled Shabbat dinner.

This new world was no longer peopled with Jews or even people who knew and understood Jews. I was the only Jew in my friendship circle, often the only Jew in my workplace or political group. How often have I said 'No, actually I didn't go to Sunday School. I'm Jewish.' My first lover in Australia warned me that her mother had never met a Jew and occasionally made racist comments about Jews. I steeled myself wondering how to behave...how to avoid offending the closeted girlfriend or her welcoming mother...after all I wanted to be liked. Fortunately, the comments never came. In those early days I was astonished that so many of the people I met had never met a Jew. Now, years later I am amazed when someone has encountered any of Jewish culture, any Jews.

So in the last 10 years in my new home I have shelved a bit of me. I have celebrated Christmas with my chosen family, but no Pesach seders, no Rosh Hashanah celebrations, no fasting on Yom Kippur. But I feel a change. These days I have one Jewish lesbian friend. Over the last 7 years of knowing her I have revelled in our semitic familiarity, despite our different countries of origin. I might even get to a Jewish Lesbian festival one of these days. And now after a holiday back in South Africa where my partner was treated to her first taste of Shabbat dinners, I choose to say the prayers over the candles, bread and wine and to wish everyone a good week. Perhaps I am getting a little closer to taking Jewishness off the shelf and integrating those parts of me with the me of Australia.

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