

## **My Jewish Journey** **By Rabbi Israel de la Piedra**

*Bio: Born in Lima, Peru, in 1956. M. A. in Political Economy and from BU, 1980. Moved to Chile, working for the United Nations for five years, then moved to Washington DC and worked for International Monetary Fund (IMF) for 20 years. Married college sweetheart, Aliza, in Jerusalem, in 2000. Made Aliyah in 2004. Ordained at Hebrew College in 2013. Now serving in the Hebrew SeniorLife community in Randolph and in AccentCare Hospice.*

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### 1. My Judaism

I have returned. That is how I see my Judaism. After a hiatus of a few generations, this great-great grandson of a Jewish immigrant from Germany to Peru has come back home. I may have traveled much in my life, but I am not a wandering Jew – I am the Jew who returned home.

I was born in a traditional Catholic family in Peru. As a teenager I discovered Judaism – or maybe Judaism discovered me. I have no recollection of how I came across Judaism for the first time, but when I was in my late teens I was already basking in Judaism. I was born with the name Enrique, and I do not have any recollection either of how or when I started to call myself Israel (I changed my name officially when I made Aliyah and kept Enrique as my middle name).

At times I have tried to rationalize my growing appreciation of Judaism since I was a teenager, but there seems to be no single answer. What was it that attracted me to Judaism? Maybe it was its love for books and the written word – I have been drawn to books since I was a child. Maybe it was its traditions and values – they seemed to be richer and more logical than what I had been exposed to until then. Maybe it was Hebrew – I always have had a love for languages (I am now learning German, my sixth language – and why German? – that's another story); I even remember taking down notes at class in college in Peru writing in Spanish but with Hebrew characters! Maybe it was the Jewish friends I consciously started

seeking – my wife Aliza is one of those friends from way back then. Maybe it was all of this, maybe it was more than this. But my inner being told me that I was Jewish, and so I tried to live like a Jew as much as I could. At some point, however, I actually discovered that I had Jewish ancestry, and the whole thing fell in place. My great-great grandfather, a man by the name of Max Bromberg, had immigrated in the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to Peru. I first found out about him from a book, called “Jews in Peru in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.” The book mentioned Max Bromberg and who he had married (a non-Jewish Peruvian lady), and I was able to tie loose ends from family stories to confirm that I was his descendant. Max Bromberg was a successful businessman, I learned later; he was one of the founders of the German Club in Lima, Peru, and his name is inscribed in a monument at the entrance of the Jewish cemetery of Lima recording the names of the donors for its establishment.

Finding out that I had Jewish ancestry helped me confirm that my Jewish journey was not a journey of conversion but a journey of return, that it was the journey of a lost Jew who finally found his way home. It had been a serious journey until then, and it became even more serious. I formally went through a conversion ceremony. I was married in a Jewish ceremony in Jerusalem to Aliza. I made Aliyah later. I took time off work to learn at the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem. Eventually I took early retirement to attend rabbinical school at Hebrew College, became a rabbi, and started working with the old, the frail and the dying.

## 2. Highlights of my life as a Jew

My life as a Jew is centered around the three principles of Torah, Avodah and Gemilut Hasadim – Torah, service of God, and acts of kindness. Learning Torah is the backbone of our life as Jews. But Torah is not just the first five books of Moses, it is so much more. The five books of Moses, which we lovingly take out from the Ark every Shabbat, are the foundation of a much larger edifice. Torah is what Moses bequeathed to us but also the accumulated wisdom of the Jewish people since those days until our day. Torah is what we learn and what we teach. Torah is what we receive from the Jewish people and what we give back. Torah is what the prophets taught us and what we build in our day. Torah is learning to pray just as it is learning to fight for Israel. Torah is basking in our tradition to celebrate our joys as well as finding refuge in it in times of pain and distress. Torah is how the Jews do it – in all its diversity, its wisdom, its questions, even in its complicatedness.

Service of God – Avodah – is the second pillar of Judaism. Just as the word Torah is a much wider construct than what we usually call “the Torah,” so service of God is so much more than coming to shul on Shabbat to pray. Service of God is rising to our charge to sanctify the name of God in everything we do and at every point in time. Service of God is not only what we do in the enclosed sanctuary of our synagogues but is mostly what we do in the open spaces of life where we meet others and we can help them. Service of God is making life better for our fellow Jews and it is also making life better for all others. Service of God is to support Israel and to strengthen our communities. Service of God is what informs my way of life.

Acts of kindness – Gemilut Hasadim – is the third pillar. It forms the backbone of my work as a rabbi. My Torah and my Avodah move me to be there for others in moments of great need. That is why my rabbinate has always been one of service to those who are getting old, to those who are sick, and to those who are dying, as well as to their families. I worked at Hebrew SeniorLife’s Newbridge facility in Dedham for a few years while I was still in rabbinical school, I then took the position of rabbi and director of spiritual care at a large Jewish institution in Miami (Miami Jewish Health, which I describe as being like Hebrew SeniorLife minus snow plus palm trees – and I eventually came back to Boston for my snow), and I currently work as a rabbi at Hebrew SeniorLife’s Simon Fireman community in Randolph and as a hospice chaplain (where I visit people of all religious backgrounds).

### 3. Decision to attend Hebrew College

My decision to become a rabbi took form when I was living in Ghana, in West Africa – granted, not the usual road to decide to become a rabbi. When I was working as an economist at the International Monetary Fund I was posted in Accra, Ghana as its Resident Representative. After the big shock of not being able to travel to Ghana on our scheduled flight on September 11, 2001, Aliza and I and the children eventually flew out there and settled down for two years. We traveled there thinking we would not see a Jewish person for all that time, until one of the first things we saw was a big sign on our way from the airport to the hotel, having just arrived, that had the word “Dizengoff” (like the name of the famous square in Tel Aviv) on it. Long story short, as they say, there were many Israelis and other Jewish “expats” living there.

One day early on, Aliza suggested that we invite people for Kabbalat Shabbat at home. It took some convincing for me to decide to lead Kabba-

lat Shabbat services in our new and strange surroundings, but we started doing it. And people joined us for prayers (and dinner!), all manner of people, including many Israelis who I am sure would never visit a synagogue in Israel. We had an open house every Friday evening at home, and all were welcome. Luckily, we never had any incident even though we were warned about Hezbollah's presence among the Lebanese in Ghana. Eventually, I started to be seen as a kind of spiritual leader in our small community. And when I asked my rabbi from the Washington DC area for a siddur that I needed because I was leading services in Ghana but we had no rabbi, he said to me, "You are wrong, you are the rabbi there." I was shocked by his words and by how I was being seen in our community. And when my posting in Ghana was over, I decided to take time off, go to Israel with Aliza, make Aliyah, and start learning in the Conservative Yeshiva.

A few years later, having returned to DC for two more years and then gone back for two more years to yet another African country (Burundi – look it up in the map, it is next to Rwanda), I took early retirement, applied at Hebrew College, went for my interview in Newton Center during a snowy day (that had to be a good sign!), and that same day I was accepted. Four years later, in June 2013, I was ordained at the old Mishkan Tefilla synagogue on Hammond Pond Parkway.

Why Hebrew College? I liked the fact that it encouraged you to adopt your own practice of Judaism and did not keep you within the strict boundaries of a certain practice. I also liked the fact that it was in Boston – the city that I have called home since I first arrived here one month before the great Blizzard of '78. I didn't like the position on Israel of many of the younger students, but it helped me to some extent to learn how to deal with those who think differently. Hebrew College was a good place for me to become a rabbi, I loved my teachers, and I made some friends there whom I appreciate very much.

#### 4. A final word on Israel

A major component of who I am as a Jewish person is my deep love for the State of Israel. Israel is necessary. Israel is the beating heart of the Jewish world. Israel is the Jewish state, tiny in size but immense in its significance. Aliza and I have a home in Israel, close to Haifa. We have grandchildren in Israel. By the time this is published our granddaughter Lily will have become a Bat Mitzvah and we will have gone to Israel to celebrate her. Israel is a miracle. It is a miracle not because God one day decided to establish it. It is a miracle because true miracles are not gifts from God in sil-

ver platters, but because a miracle is what we are able to do with our own hands inspired by God, given strength and resilience by God, given eyes by God that we can open and seize the opportunity to build, to grow, and to deliver. Israel is the miracle that we all have built and continue to build together, the all-too-real miracle that we fight for together. The year 5784 started with a tragedy, but the miracle that we bring about goes on, and better times lie ahead. We will recover, we will build, we will grow, and we will deliver. Am Israel Hai!