

A Big Enough Umbrella for Singing in the Rain

by
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Most of what I know about Judaism I learned from my friend Michelle. Michelle and I have been friends for most of our lives, but the beginning of our friendship goes back to a time before I was born, when my mother was only four. My mother lived in Bremerton, Washington at the time. She went outside to play one day and it was raining, and my mom had a tiny umbrella. There was another little girl outside that my mother had never seen before, because the girl's family had only moved in the day before. The girl had a big umbrella. The girl asked if my mom wanted to share her umbrella, so the two girls stood together under the big umbrella in the pouring rain, and became friends.

My mom and the other girl's friendship lasted. The girl's name was Carol and she and my mom both grew up and got married and had children and they told their daughters the story about how they met. "Tell us the umbrella story again, Mom," Michelle and I would ask our mothers.

Michelle lives in Washington so we mainly see each other during vacation times. When her family visited us in Utah, we all piled into our van and drove up into the mountains. All the way up Michelle and my sister Mary and I sang all the songs we could think of. Mary and I taught Michelle our favorite camp songs and Primary songs, including "Popcorn Popping on the Apricot Tree." Michelle taught us more camp songs and songs in Hebrew and Yiddish.

Several times Mary and I stayed with Michelle's family in Bellevue, Washington. We would stay up all night talking and sleep in until Michelle's mom reminded us that if we didn't get up soon we wouldn't get to go to the aquarium or the Pike Place Market or the baseball game. Carol always asked Mary and me to help with the dishes or other chores, and it made us feel at home since it told us she thought of us like family. We called her Aunt Carol and I loved to talk to Aunt Carol about our families or just about life because she always listened to me like I was a grown up, and she always had interesting things to tell me about. When Mary and I got in an argument one time when we were staying with Michelle, she and Aunt Carol said they were glad because they thought we were perfect and never quarrelled. We'd seen Michelle get into spats with her sisters Melissa and Lirit, so we all felt better to realize we were all just human.

Sometimes late at night Mary and Michelle and I would talk about religion. We found out that we felt the same about a lot of things. Like us, Michelle didn't believe in drinking or smoking or sleeping around. We all thought we should be obedient to our parents and to God and try to live a good life. Mary and I were excited to discover that Michelle believed in the same ancient prophets we did, like Moses and Elijah. We found out that the Maslans even set a plate for Elijah every year at Passover.

One time I told Michelle we believed our church was the only true church. It was what I had been taught and in fact I did believe it, but Michelle got upset. "You mean you think that Mormons are the only people who have the truth?" she asked. I didn't know what to answer. That must be what we believed, yet I didn't want Michelle to feel left out. I don't remember what I finally said, but after that I was more cautious when I talked about religion.

Michelle's grandma Florence lives in a big house in Seattle near Lake Washington, a wonderful house with hidden cubbyholes from Prohibition days and a big front porch. When Mary and I were staying with Michelle, sometimes we would get to go to Shabbas dinner on Friday night at the Big House. All of Michelle's uncles and aunts and cousins would be there and they all knew us as Betsy's daughter's, the little Mormon girls. They always had grape juice for us and the other little kids when the adults had wine. Being with Michelle's big family reminded us of our own family at home. Mary and I would listen to the prayers and watch the candles being lit and sample the horseradish or chopped liver and feel warm and cozy and at home, and we would think how much fun it must be to be Jewish.

My grandparents were also friends with Michelle's grandparents so for big religious events everyone was invited. My whole family came to Michelle's Bat Mitzvah celebration. It was fun to see how the friendship between the two families, the Latter-day Saint family and the Jewish family, had lasted all these years.

As we were growing up Michelle and Mary and I continued to have a lot in common. At home Mary and I were in school musicals; at her school Michelle played a part in "Singing in the Rain," and she could quote almost the whole show to us. Every year when we saw each other for our short visits it was as though no time had passed at all. Michelle told us about how she was always the one who cleaned up and took care of everyone who was sick at the parties she went to, since she didn't drink. Mary and I talked about what it was like to live in an area where almost everyone was a member of the same church, but where people often seemed to treat their religion very casually and carelessly. Sometimes it even seemed like we had more in common with Michelle than with our Mormon friends.

Michelle still loved to sing. She was a counselor at Jewish youth summer camps and she would teach the kids all the songs she knew, even "Popcorn Popping on the Apricot Tree." She told Mary and me the story of Channukah and showed us how to write our names in Hebrew, and we stayed up until late at night talking about the boys we liked.

Michelle and I loved each others' grandparents. One summer my grandpa took Michelle and Mary and me fishing on the Puget Sound along with my step-grandma Marie. My grandma Marie is very cute and energetic and lively and says things like "Land's sakes!" and Michelle loved to be around her. Mary and I were used to Mormon grandmas so we in our turn loved Michelle's grandma Laura Weiss for being frank and a little sarcastic and opinionated. Grandma Laura was always telling Michelle and her sister Lirit to comb their hair. To Michelle this was annoying but Mary and I thought it was funny.

The summer that Michelle's Grandma Laura passed away my whole family had been visiting in Washington. Aunt Carol said she was glad that Mary and I were there to be with Michelle at that time. We really believed that we would see Grandma Laura again and that comforted us. Although it's not taught as part of their religion, the Maslans told us that as a family they also believe in a life after this life.

Conservative Jews like the Maslans don't believe in proselyting, so when I received a mission call I was a little nervous to call the Maslans to tell them about it. Aunt Carol was very nice about it, though. She said they were happy for me because they knew that was something I had wanted to do. My older brother had already served a mission and we had talked about it a lot, but this was different since I was the first of the girls to go.

I knew after I left on my mission I wouldn't hear from Michelle very often because although she was a great one to talk on the phone or in person, she wasn't much of a letter writer. (Every time we visited she'd show us one or two finished but unsent letters that she found when she cleaned out her room.) I wasn't really good about writing, either, but I thought about Michelle often while I was in Belgium. Because of my friendship with Michelle, many of my ideas about Judaism were in the form of vague associations: I thought of warmth, humor, strong family bonds, devotion to God, comfort, and love. I had read some things and I also knew that the Jewish people had suffered. Michelle and I pointed it out as another similarity between Jews and Latter-day Saints that both groups of people had undergone persecution for their beliefs. A couple of experiences that I had on my mission made me more aware of this reality.

In one city where I spent four months of my mission, I made friends with a Catholic lady who rode the bus with us on Sunday mornings when we were on our way to church. Every week she went to pick up friends who were in a rest home, to help them attend Mass. Since people in that area had told me of the difficulties they'd had when the war swept through Belgium and they were forced to flee into the Ardennes mountains, one week I asked my Catholic friend whether times had been hard during the war. "No," she replied. "Not really." But the question must have weighed on her mind because the next week she came back to the same topic. "I told you last week that it wasn't hard to live here during the war," she

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said. "I was talking about the ordinary people -- but for others it was difficult." She told me of Catholic priests whose lives had been endangered because they protected Jews and hid them in the churches. "One priest," she said, "was shot down in the street not far from here." It surprised me that she had remembered my question for a whole week and thought it important enough to bring up again.

In the same city we met a man who said that because of differences with the Catholic Church, his family had been atheist for several generations. Because he was an atheist, he said, he could not accept what he saw happening during World War II, so he became a spy against the Germans. Six other of his friends also were spies. All six of them, he said, were killed. He was the only survivor of their group. When he told us this story we were sitting in his quiet front room in the quiet suburb where he lived, but he told us that years before that street had been at the front of a war zone.

Another time we met an elderly gentleman who said that both of his parents had died in concentration camps, one at Treblinka and the other at Auschwitz. I had met several people who knew of Jews in the country during the war but I had met few personally. He was a very polite man, and he also seemed very tired to me.

About a month before I was scheduled to come home from my mission, I was serving in the city of Bruxelles. It was January and it was dark and cold and rained most of the time, but I was full of joy to be where I was and doing what God wanted me to do. People of all nationalities filled the buses and streets of Bruxelles and I wanted to meet as many as I could and share with them the message of what brought me so much happiness.

One day we got on a bus near the train station. I don't remember where we were going that day, but it was only about a twenty minute bus ride. As I got on the bus, I smiled at a very old woman who was sitting in one of the front seats. She was tiny and wrinkled and was huddled into the seat. She smiled back at me and then beckoned me to sit down in the seat opposite her. "It's so nice for someone to smile," she said. "People don't ever smile anymore these days." I started to answer but she took my arm and interrupted me. "Since you smiled so nicely," she said, "I want to tell you my story. I don't tell people very often because it's hard for me to tell it, but I want you to hear it." She started to tell me about her life in Poland when she was young. She lived in a ghetto and had participated in several uprisings, but then one day the soldiers came in and started burning everything. They told the people to come out of the buildings with their arms up. "What could I do?" she asked. "I had to obey them or they would kill me." The soldiers put everyone on a train. The train was packed and as it started to roll several people jumped from doorways, but soldiers shot at them as they jumped. "I knew I had to get out of that train," my friend told me. "There was a little tiny window up at the top and I squeezed my body through it. I knew if I jumped I might die, but I had to get out of that train." She did jump, and she did survive, and she lived to raise a son in Belgium, but during the war she lost many friends and family members and a beautiful little daughter. She told me that for years she couldn't smile, and she couldn't talk about what had happened during the war. "I was too ashamed," she told me. "I wasn't ashamed for myself, I was ashamed for humanity -- ashamed that people could do those things to other people."

I hadn't noticed any time passing, but my bus had arrived at its destination. I wanted to spend much more time with this woman, but I had to leave. I thanked my new friend for sharing her story with me, knowing that in that large city I would probably never see her again.

A few months later I was in Washington State, attending my friend Michelle's wedding. I felt as if I'd been away for much more than just a couple of years. Michelle was the same as ever, laughing and full of life, and she had become a professional singer, performing traditional songs with her own group. She remembered all the songs we learned when we were kids and even the words to a couple of songs that we made up. We talked about the things we did together when we were kids and we talked about my sister Mary, who is away on a mission in Japan. We all missed having Mary there for the wedding, but Aunt Carol reminded us that Mary was there in spirit, if not in body.

The wedding ceremony was at the synagogue on Mercer Island. Michelle and Joel were married

under a canopy and then afterwards there was a big reception and everyone danced to klesmer music and later, at the dinner, Michelle even sang for us. My sisters and brothers and I learned how to do the dances quickly and one of Aunt Carol's friends said to her "Your friend Betsy's children are such good Jewish children -- they even know all the Jewish dances." My sister Susanna and I decided that Mormon wedding receptions are boring and we joked about marrying one of Michelle's cousins so we could have a big Mormon-Jewish wedding.

The day before the wedding, we attended worship services at the synagogue Joel's parents go to. Michelle wasn't there because the bride's not supposed to see the groom the day before the wedding. Joel's father is Orthodox, so in this synagogue the women sat separate from the men. At one point during the service, when Joel came up to the stand to read from the Torah, the women passed around a basket of candy which we threw at him so that he and Michelle will have a sweet life. The Cantor also read from the Haftorah, which are the writings of the other prophets. The passage that was read on the day before Joel's and Michelle's wedding was from Isaiah. In the King James Translation of the Bible it's found in Isaiah 52 and three verses of it have been among my favorites for a long time, because they talk about singing:

Thy watchmen shall lift up the voice; with the voice together shall they sing: for they shall see eye to eye, when the Lord shall bring again Zion.

Break forth into joy, sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem: for the Lord hath comforted his people, he hath redeemed Jerusalem.

The Lord hath made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

Sitting in synagogue and hearing these familiar words read in an unfamiliar language, I thought about how Michelle and I have sung together for all of our lives. I thought of my friend in the bus in Bruxelles and how for a few minutes as she told me her story we looked past differences of language and background and saw eye to eye. I thought again of Michelle's question to me years ago: "Do you think that Mormons are the only people who have the truth?"

I know that I need to be true to the things I believe, and follow them. I also know that God knows much more than I do, and his love is an umbrella big enough to cover all his children: all the ends of the earth will see his salvation. To truly follow his teachings will provide me with the kind of love only he can offer, love that respects others' beliefs and loves them unconditionally. I am glad that Michelle has been willing to share with me so much of her life and what's important to her. I am happy that she is faithful to her beliefs. I hope that I will also live up to my beliefs, so that I can be worthy of the good friends that God has blessed me with -- and Michelle and I will always sing together.