

# In Your Own Words

Ilene Serlin, Ph. D.  
IMAGO  
Center For Psychotherapy  
And The Counseling Arts  
1862 Union Street  
San Francisco, CA 94123

## Jew-Bu

BY ILENE SERLIN, Ph.D.



*Jewish by birth, Buddhist by choice,  
a woman struggles  
to reconcile two faiths.*

LIKE MANY AMERICANS OF MY GENERATION, I WAS DRAWN DURING MY college years into an exploration of Eastern spirituality. For most of my early adulthood, I was a devoted practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism. But as I neared the age of 40, I became homesick for my own roots, my own tribe. Thus began a midlife journey back to Judaism, in the course of which I came to see how my native and adopted religions fit together—how each one served as shadow for the other.

As a high school exchange student in Israel in the early 1960s, I had been a full-blooded Zionist. I was exuberant over Israeli music and dance, in love with the country and the vital, pioneering spirit of the people there. But instead of repatriating, I went on to college at the University of Michigan, where I got involved in existentialist studies, political activism, yoga, and meditation. Suddenly, Judaism wasn't cool. Instead, I was drawn to the unfamiliar, the taboo, the Other—studying exotic Eastern cultures and dating boyfriends of other faiths.

There were many reasons for my departure from Judaism. My explorations of yoga had led me to see the body as sacred—indeed, this route eventually led to my choice of dance therapy as a profession. Where in Judaism was the expression of spirit through body, I wondered? In general, my sense of Jewish bodies was that they were overweight; fed on food too rich and plentiful; spilling over with diffuse, effusive energy. I turned my back on all of that, seeking Eastern discipline and containment.

So I studied yoga and Tantric sex and the stories of Hindu goddesses. To me, these provided powerful images of the body as a disciplined and sensuous way of knowing and expressing spirit, of uniting eros and psyche.

Institute, where I immersed myself in the contemplative traditions of Vajrayana Buddhism. It was to be the beginning of a 15-year discipleship with Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche.

During a month-long *dathun* in Boulder, in which we meditated for eight hours a day, I learned the importance of silence, letting go, and doing one action at a time. I grew accustomed to rooms that were sparse and clean and to seeing discipline as a positive expression of natural clarity and openness.

In Buddhism, I found a direct, experiential sense of the sacred. That was not true for Judaism—although I continued to study its traditions, hoping that my increasing spiritual awareness would allow me to make a deep connection. At a rabbi-led class on mysticism in the early 1980s, we analyzed the story of Ezekiel's chariot—a mystical image if ever there was one. Yet the whole exercise seemed too intellectual. For a while, I even explored Chassidism, a mystical sect started by the Ba'al Shem Tov in 18th-century Russia. But the Chassidic synagogues were filled with children, noise, and gossip—and I found myself missing the feeling of awe and contemplative time I found in Buddhism.

But as I approached my 40th birthday, things began subtly to shift. I found myself longing for my own tradition. Now that I was a mature adult, it did not seem so important to distance myself from my parents—or their religion. Instead, I began to appreciate them and to value the passion and expressiveness of our ethnicity. Aware of the approaching second half of my life and consequently of my mortality, I no longer wanted to run away. I wanted to stay home—indeed, make a home—and confront difficult issues with my parents and my origins.

Synchronicity and my psyche assisted in the return. Old friends from my Zionist days reappeared. I was offered the chance to return to Israel twice and did so; although the country had changed radically, I still felt a vibrancy there. Through Jungian analysis, I explored images and metaphors that appeared in my dreams and in my waking life, images that I could see were underlying and guiding my journey through both faiths.

One striking image was that of the wanderer. As I contemplated the condi-

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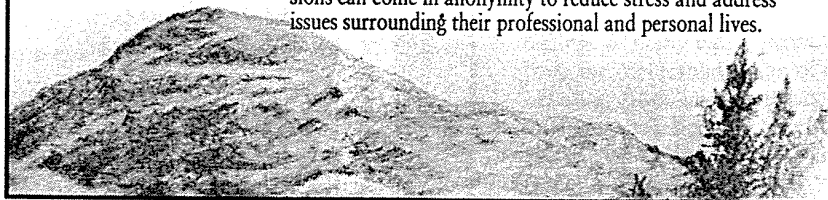
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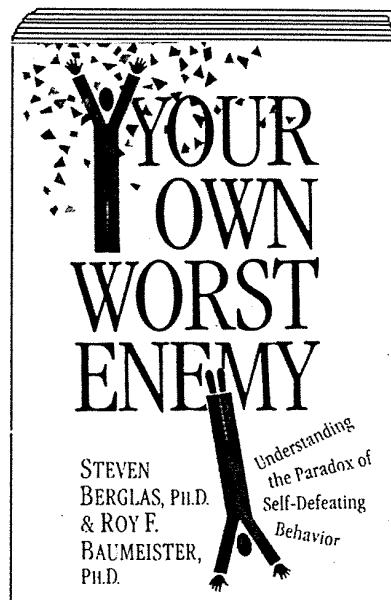
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tion of exile and the diaspora—a situation both Jewish and Tibetan—I came to understand my loneliness and sense of dislocation from an archetypal and cultural perspective. The Hebrew word *na-v'nad* means both a fugitive and a wanderer. As protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr pointed out, wanderers are "persons in motion—passing through territories not their own—seeking something we might call 'completion', or perhaps 'clarity,' a goal to which only the spirit's compass points the way." Befriending my wandering helped to alleviate my feelings of isolation and helped me to see myself as belonging to a tribe of wanderers who shared the experience of exile.

The image of the orphan had a similar hold on me; it described my feelings of being cut off from my roots, from the oral transmission of ritual and blessing, from my ancestors. Reading Paul Cowan's book *An Orphan in History*, which identified the orphaned condition as a historically Jewish phenomenon, gave me an enormous sense of relief and recognition. My sense of being an orphan did not need to cut me off. I realized, but could in fact connect me to other Jews.

Finally, I worked with the image of wrestling. Although for years I strove for the Eastern ideal of serenity, my own mind remained more like a Woody Allen monologue. When a rabbi told me that Judaism was "a noisy religion" that was "about complexity," I felt some of the pressure taken off my quest for simplicity and surrender. Reading Arthur Waskow's *Seasons of Our Joy* also helped, as I came to see that ever since Abraham the Jewish relationship with God has not been one of faith but of dialogue and covenant; the intimacy of wrestling with God. I was very moved by this idea of a relational spirituality and relieved to know that my restless Buddhist "monkey mind" was perfectly acceptable as Jewish mind.

As gratifying as any of these midlife revelations was my discovery of a Jewish tradition of ecstatic dance still very much alive in my own family. At a family gathering, my great-aunt told us about her father—*chazzan* of a Chassidic group in Russia for whom singing and dancing had been the path to spirit. Apparently, when he was moved, he would jump up

on the table, cover his face, and sing and dance with great emotion. When I asked my great-aunt about her father's teachings, she said these had not been expressed through words but through "a special communication... he talked from the heart; he had a soul." When I asked her how he meditated, she danced around the living room for me. At age 75 and under five feet tall, she looked remarkably like Isadora Duncan.

As I danced with her, I reflected on how I had found my way into the obscure profession of dance therapy—which combined ritual, psyche, art, and community in a way missing in traditional psychotherapy. I began to feel that I had not chosen my spiritual search at all—that it was somehow inherited, somehow inevitable. Soon after that I discovered Miriam, the biblical prophetess and sister of Moses, who by devising a clever plan to save her brother's life helped the Jews escape bondage in Egypt. Miriam did not express her gift of prophecy through the words and logos of man but through song and dance. When the Red Sea parted during the Exodus, she gathered the women together and led them across, timbrel in hand. Hers is the first recorded song in the Bible. As I and several other women continued to explore the tradition of sacred dance in Judaism, we were given the name "Sisters of Miriam" by Rabbi Zalman Schachter.

As I look back on the forks and branches in my spiritual path, I can glimpse a meaning and coherence that emerges with increasing clarity only over time. It might seem, after all, that Judaism—with its emphasis on memory, guilt, and responsibility—couldn't be more different than the cool, spaciousness of Buddhism, which invites its followers to move beyond their personal histories? But to me, the two are not incompatible. I need clarity, discipline, and abstraction—yes. But I also crave closeness and warmth, rhythm and emotion. To me, it is as if the two religions represent different archetypes within the Self, different voices in a dialogue. In my life, that dialogue has not stopped but continues to deepen as my journey unfolds.

Ilene Serlin, Ph.D., is a professor at the Saybrook Institute and a psychotherapist in private practice in San Francisco and Mill Valley.

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