



A Question of Membership (C)

Today, Shinge Roko Sherry Chayat Roshi remembers little about the meetings with Rabbi Sheldon Ezring to discuss her family's membership at Temple Concord. When Rabbi Ezring told her that they could not become members, but were welcome at services, she was "shocked."¹ At some point in their conversations, she recalled, the word "apostate" was used. She added, "To tell you the truth, I was so upset, I don't remember what he said. All I know is we were rejected." Chayat Roshi explained, "...I guess I didn't know enough about Judaism to think that there would be such resistance on the part of a Reform movement, because I knew a lot of mixed marriages at that temple. And I felt, well... it would be the perfect place for us because we're bringing each of us in a way a mixed marriage, Buddhism and Judaism, and so they'll understand. But of course I was wrong."

"A Strong Spiritual Craving"

Chayat Roshi explained that even as a young child, she had "a strong spiritual craving." Her early years were spent living with her mother and grandmother in a predominantly Jewish area of Brooklyn. Her grandmother was observant and kept Kosher, but her mother "had no use for religion whatsoever." At age four, she and her mother, together with a new stepfather, left Brooklyn; ultimately, they settled in a town in New Jersey where they were the only Jewish family. When she was in second grade, her best friend told her: "My mother said you can't be Jewish because you don't have horns."

She recalled, "We were the only Jewish family, and ... we weren't that Jewish." They did not celebrate the Jewish holidays; indeed, each year, her family put up a Christmas tree. When Chayat's grandmother visited, she insisted that the tree be put outside, out of view. Her grandmother, however, wasn't interested in questions about the nature of God; instead, she told Chayat: "'This is what we do. We just light the candles on Friday night. I don't have to know about God. I just do it, keep a Kosher home.' So, I guess, you know, that was kind of my exposure to Judaism."

Living with her stepfather's undiagnosed mental illness left Chayat anxious and unhappy as a child, and she found solace in silent reflection. "I would sit outside next to a tree and just let everything go, and kind of allow a river to flow through me. And I felt at one, at peace, and outside of the little bubble of misery that I had been in." She would later learn that she was meditating. In the eighth grade, she came upon Zen Buddhism in a *World Cultures* textbook, and thought: "There is a name for this? I couldn't believe it. And so then I knew. I had to go and find a teacher and I had to go and train somewhere." In the late sixties, she joined the Zen Studies Society in New York, and was ordained as a Zen priest in 1984. By the early 1990s, she was the leader of the Syracuse Zen Center.

A Turning Point

As an adult, Chayat regularly celebrated the Jewish holidays and hosted a Passover Seder at her home. After her son was born, she became more immersed in Jewish life. "I wanted to have my son feel identified as a Jew and let him make up his own mind if he wanted to follow the faith or not. ... At least he would have the opportunity to grow up and see what that was like and learn Hebrew and do all those things that actually I never had." They were members at Beth Sholom, a conservative temple in Syracuse that many of her friends from Syracuse University attended. After attending a Bar Mitzvah at Temple Concord, Chayat thought, "maybe this would be a better fit for us." The Reform temple seemed like "a nice place, and not too demanding." Before they could become members, they would need to meet with the Rabbi.

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Chayat recalled that the meeting with Rabbi Ezring began on a friendly note. After her husband mentioned their Buddhist practice, Ezring followed up with a few questions. Chayat described her meditation practice, and her role at the Zen Center of Syracuse. "... I had already had a re-ordination in 1985, and had been given authorization to lead this group here in Syracuse. So I told him about that and I could just see that he was feeling very uncomfortable, just [his] body language and moving away and tightening up." She explained, "[H]is expression was a kind of mixture of fear and sympathy." Ezring told her that he would get back to her.

A Decision

Chayat was shocked and hurt when she learned that they would not be permitted to join Temple Concord. She explained, "...I never felt this was something that God disapproved of. I really felt that what I was doing was what I should be doing and in no way was being a Zen Buddhist priest making it impossible for me to be Jewish. I was a Jew who was doing this. It was my spiritual path." This spiritual path would lead her, in the years that passed, to become a major figure in American Buddhism. Today, Shinge Roko Sherry Chayat Roshi is the abbot of the Zen Center of Syracuse and the abbot of Dai Bosatsu Zendo Monastery in the Catskills.

She noted: "I would say there's more of a private being Jewish than public interaction as a Jew, but my public persona is as a Zen priest. But I quote Jewish text all the time so I never hide it when I'm doing a talk, a Zen talk. I often will bring in a reference to something I've been exploring or something in the high holy days text or something like that." She continues to celebrate the Jewish holidays, and she and her now ex-husband still celebrate Hanukkah together. Her son had his religious training and Bar Mitzvah at Beth Sholom. "And at this point he doesn't particularly follow any religious path ... he identifies as a Jew but spiritually and philosophically perhaps more Buddhist."

Chayat emphasized that she doesn't blame Rabbi Ezring. She explained, "I don't think he knew very much about Buddhism, and he didn't really want to go there ... I don't know. So some people have more of a cosmopolitan or sophisticated attitude than others. Some are narrow and tight in their thinking and want to be always on the side of what's certain and what's approved, and I think he thought more towards the latter but I don't fault him for it. That was what he had to deal with."

Chayat added:

Well, I think if you know anything about Buddhism you'll know that there is no real such thing as Buddhism. "Buddha" means awakened one and to be a Buddhist means you're on the path of waking up from delusion and embracing all life in its interconnectedness. That does not go against Judaism. And to be a Zen priest means that I have given my life to this practice of Zen, of meditation, of waking up and of helping others to do the same. It doesn't go against Judaism. And some people say, 'Well, do you believe in God?' Well, I believe in what we might call the ground of being or the ultimate or the supreme wisdom. I don't have to call it God but I can call it God. It doesn't bother me to call it God.

Through her work with a local interfaith organization, Chayat Roshi met the rabbi that succeeded Ezring after his retirement. Today, some twenty years after asking to join, Chayat is a member at Temple Concord; however, between writing, teaching, and shuttling between the Zen Center of Syracuse and the monastery in the Catskills, she isn't able to attend services as often as she'd like.

¹ All quotes from Shinge Roshi Sherry Chayat: Shinge Roshi Sherry Chayat, phone interview by Emily Sigalow, May 14, 2013.