

Transformational journey

Angel Himsel's memoir of her conversion to Judaism is a beautiful read

• AARON LEIBEL

Early in *A River Could Be a Tree*, Angela Himsel writes: "Martin Luther... married a nun, a woman he had helped smuggle out of a convent in a herring barrel. While irrelevant to Luther's religious beliefs, a nun in a herring barrel is always worth mentioning."

When I read that passage, I was sure I was going to love this book. I was not to be disappointed. Himsel is particularly honest about providing insight into her thoughts and feelings. She shares so much with the reader that only the clichéd hyperbole "baring of the soul" seems fitting.

Himsel's memoir traces her transformation from a fundamentalist Christian – a member of the Worldwide Church of God – who grew up in rural Indiana into a practicing Jew living in New York.

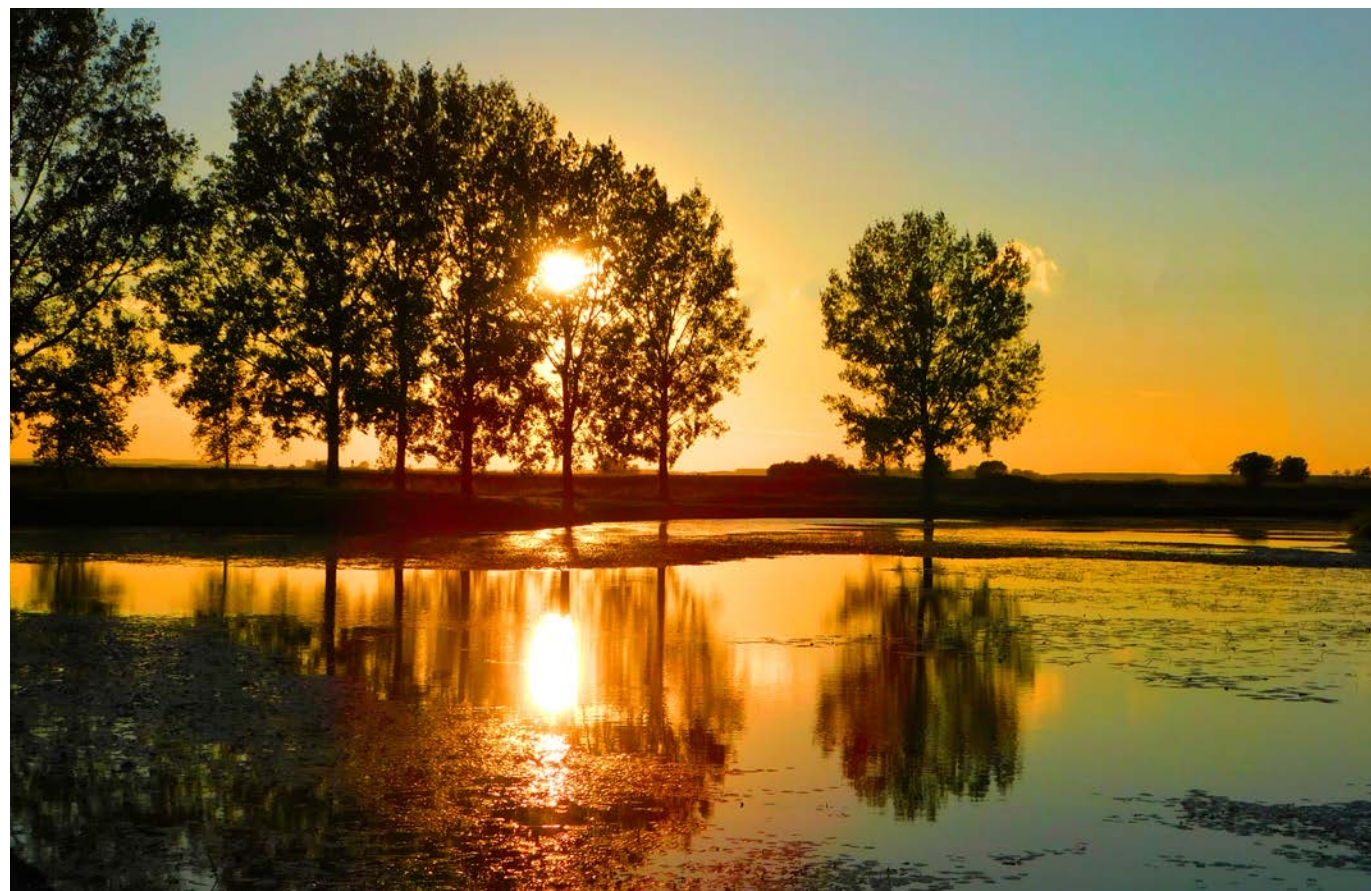
During her journey to Judaism, she continued to believe in a God who would punish her severely for her sins – a kind of an early Hebrew Bible, vengeance-seeking version of Jesus – and yet she continued to act in a way she believed was evil and would prevent her from being saved and making it to the "Kingdom" of the righteous.

As an undergraduate at Indiana University, she would play cards and drink beer until late at night, defend women's rights in discussions with feminist friends, go "skinny dipping" and read works of lesbian fiction. But she had been taught that homosexuality was a sin, abortion was immoral, and "Jesus was preparing to pounce on earth." By her church's standards, "Indiana University was the devil's playground. I was having fun on Satan's teeter-totter and jungle gym even as I privately denounced them."

Even before she had met – or even thought about – modern Jews or their religion, she was alienated by some of her church's doctrines. She was appalled, for example, by her church's misogyny.

"The ministers incessantly reminded the congregation that it was Eve who had tempted Adam, Eve who had disobeyed, Eve who was responsible for the world's ills," Himsel wrote. "The church railed against the proposed Equal Rights Amendment as being an assault against the family. Women had their role, but in their role, they could never rule over a man. It was unnatural, ungodly, un-Christian."

This theme – questioning the doctrines that her church advocated but sticking with it because of her fear of not being among the elect who will be saved when the Christian Messiah re-



ANGELA HIMSEL found herself 'turning spiritually south, toward Jerusalem.' (Pxhere)

turns – is a constant until she converts. Without minimizing the religious and psychological distance she had to travel from the Worldwide Church of God to Judaism, some tenets of her faith eased that transition.

That church, while believing in Jesus, celebrated the Sabbath on Saturday, Jewish and not Christian holidays and did not eat foods forbidden in the Bible to Jews. So, to become a Jew, Himsel was not forced to give up Christmas trees, Easter eggs and bacon – perks of American Christian life already forbidden by her church.

Before her spiritual journey began, she visited Israel as a student studying abroad – an experience that greatly affected her.

"In my imagination, Israel was imbued with holiness unlike any other place on earth," she writes. "I was certain that merely stepping foot on the soil would bring me closer to God, closer to the Holy Spirit, and thus to salvation."

But her study in Israel gave her a new perspective on religion and the nature of life. "Without intending to, and without even knowing it myself, I was turning spiritually south, toward Jerusalem and toward the first-century rabbinical Judaism that Saul/Paul had left behind. Instead of the Christian

view that this world was the devil's, and that Jesus alone could swoop in and save it, I was drawn to the possibility that this world was God's and that we, as God's partner, would perfect it."

Eventually, after moving to New York, dating a Jewish man and becoming pregnant, she decided to leave her church and become a Jew. Her initial decision to convert was closely connected to her unborn child, wanting him or her to be accepted completely as a member of the Jewish community – leading to her converting under Orthodox auspices to ensure that every Jew would accept her child as Jewish.

But it wasn't only about her child. On a trip to Indiana to see her family, Himsel attended a church service, where she found the ministers certain they knew what God wanted, what he thought.

"Certainty made me nervous," the author writes. "I was far more at ease with ambiguity. This was a complete reversal of how I used to be. It was much more Jewish to be ambiguous and uncertain."

Apparently, the conversion took.

The author, Angela Himsel, will be attending a reading and book signing on February 5 at the Tmol Shilshom cafe in Jerusalem.

A RIVER COULD BE A TREE

By Angela Himsel
Fig Tree Books
288 pages; \$23.95

