

Celebrating and Maintaining a Jewish Identity

by Susanna Eve

L'auteure réfléchit sur son expérience en tant que femme et mère juive.

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My name is Susanna Eve, Shoshana Chava, daughter of Naomi, daughter of Michal, daughter of Eva. I am descended from Eastern European Jews on both sides, from Russia and Poland via England and the United States to Canada. I came to Canada, 30 years ago, as a child. My husband was raised a Protestant and is of Scottish and German descent. He was born and grew up in Edmonton, Alberta.

I moved to Montreal in 1982 to attend university and stayed for 12 years. I met my husband six months after moving there. We lived in the inner city in a neighbourhood that was very ethnically and religiously mixed. There was a large and heterogeneous Hassidic community. There were large Italian and Portuguese and Greek communities. There were also many French Canadian families and many, many mixed families.

As is the case so often, it was not until my sons were born that I gave much thought to what it meant to be Jewish. I had never denied my Jewishness or wished to be otherwise in spite of experiencing anti-Semitism at various times and places over the years. I grew up in a secular household in Toronto. My parents both identified themselves strongly as Jews but were agnostic. I did have a *bat mitzvah* at the age of 14, but my knowledge of "Jewish things" was limited. I have always felt that if I hadn't had a brother I would never have had any exposure to the "reli-

gious" or "spiritual" side of Judaism. I knew the Jewish holidays and had celebrated them to a varying degree since I had left home. In recent years however, I have read widely about Judaism in general, and Jewish feminism in particular.

A few years ago, an Israeli woman in my neighbourhood, who ran a family daycare in her home, invited us to celebrate one of the Jewish holidays with her and some of the other Jews in our neighbourhood. Like most of the Jews in this group, she had had children with a non-Jewish partner. This woman, and many of the other similar families, followed a variety of spiritual paths alongside Judaism. Yet, they wanted their children to know what it meant to be Jewish and to maintain their Jewish identity. They did not, however, wish to have a traditional or exclusively Jewish household. Sometimes these holiday celebrations were impromptu gatherings and sometimes they were organized far in advance and attended by many families. My children loved the ones we attended.

In December of 1992 when I was very pregnant with my fourth son, this woman decided it would be wonderful to have a Hanukkah party every night of Hanukkah at a different house in our neighbourhood. We went to every one and they were wonderful indeed. Here was a place where these mixed families could fully celebrate together in a non-judgmental and inclusive setting. We also invited our non-Jewish friends to join us. We did this for two years in a row before we left Montreal. Some nights there were just a few people there and some nights it was very crowded. The first year was very special. I will always remember the joy, the singing, the sharing, and the learning about different as well as common traditions, and of course, the food.

In November of 1994, I moved

with my husband and my four sons to Halifax. In Halifax, the Jewish community is much smaller and unless you look very hard, almost invisible. I have not met many Jews who do not belong to either one or the other of the two synagogues in the city.

One day this past fall, almost a year after we moved to Halifax, coming home on the bus I caught sight of what I thought was a *succah*¹ along side of a house. That night I walked my dog back down there and sure enough, it was a *succah*. The house had a *mezuzah*² on the door as well. In Montreal, my old neighbourhood had been filled with *succahs*, many on balconies looking almost like little wooden "johnny on the spots." Seeing one here was a very reassuring and familiar sight. We later discovered that the synagogue down the street had a lovely *succah* out back as well.

*Purim*³ is approaching and Halifax does not have a kosher bakery. Last year we did without *hamantaschen*.⁴ In Montreal we would buy them from the bakery and once we when we were visiting Toronto during *Purim* we bought lovely ones from a

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bakery there. This year we have decided to make our own.

In Halifax, I miss the vibrant and strong religious and non-religious Jewish communities that were in the other Canadian cities I have lived in most of my life. However, we are finding that, in different and gentle ways, we can still celebrate the holidays. We live in the city here, but the

air is clear, and we can see the moon and stars many nights from inside our house. This helps us to keep track of the holidays as well, as they follow the cycles of the moon. We built our first *succah* this past fall. My sons will know at least this strand among the many that make up the colourful braid of their lives and heritage. They know that they are Jewish and are forming their own identity and feelings about what it means to be a Jew. They are part of a 5,000-year-old tradition and a network of people around the world. May there be peace everywhere one day soon. *Shalom*.

Susanna Eve is an eclectic witch of Jewish origins. She shares her life and home with the father of her children. Self-employed, and a full time mother, she is working in the field of menstrual education and as a breastfeeding activist.

¹An open to the sky shed, a desert memory, a place where one has meals during the holiday of *Succot*.

²A small parchment scroll inscribed with a prayer, encased and fixed to the door frame of one's home. It is a reminder of faith.

³The holiday which commemorates the rescue of the Jews of Persia by Queen Esther.

⁴*Purim* pastry.

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published by Fireweed (as a special issue) in 1992

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