

SEE

BORN INTO DARKNESS, BATYA
MIRYAM FORGES HER OWN PATH OF
LIGHT AND KEDUSHAH

ME

As told to
Devorie
Kreiman by
Batya
Miryam
Hanse



I

entered this world two months early, weighing only three pounds, and quickly lost one whole pound. It was 1952. My mother was a smoker who had lost two babies before I was born. I was diagnosed with retinopathy of prematurity, a visual impairment common in premature or low-birth-weight infants, in which blood vessels swell and grow over the retina, the light-sensitive part of the eyes. Some babies with ROP get better even without treatment. But some, even with treatment, go blind.

I was one of the latter group. Although I'm considered "legally" blind, I prefer the term "partially blind"—even though it's a small part: I have less than 10% of normal vision. What a fully-sighted person sees at 200 feet, I see at 20 feet, and my field of vision is narrow, unreliable, and worsens under glare. From my right eye, I can see only peripherally and in bits. For example, I see faces, but not details like eye color. It's hard for me to tell, especially with children, if I'm looking at a boy or a girl. When there's a group of people near me—even people I know—it's difficult for me to distinguish who is who.

I'm not here and not there—not fully blind, not fully sighted. A blind child is taught adaptation skills such as cane travel and braille from the start. I wasn't. I spent my early years figuring out how to get by on my own. I developed skills I still use. For example, when I meet people, I pay attention to their voices, to how heavy their footsteps are, how quickly they walk—and remember them that way.

My father died of polio when I was two and a half. I don't remember him. My mother was shattered by his death and couldn't talk about him. No one did. It's a painful void that

never closed.

Even as a preschooler, I was different—and not only because of my vision impairment. Blind was the only way I knew how to be, and I got by just fine around the sighted kids. What set me apart was the way I questioned what I was told and constantly pushed for more answers, for more depth. I know now that it was my *neshamah* calling out, seeking the truth.

There weren't many Jews in Raleigh, North Carolina, in the 1950s. We weren't Jewish—my parents were Protestants. My father's family had emigrated from Germany in the 1880s. (When I learned about the Holocaust, I worried that perhaps our relatives who'd remained in Germany had supported Hitler. It was a great relief to discover later that just the opposite was true—a tree had been planted in Israel to honor a member of our family for being a righteous gentile.)

When I started first grade in public school, I recognized that I had to work harder than the other students in order to keep up. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, IDEA, which was passed in 1975 to ensure that children with disabilities were given the support they needed through the

WHAT SET ME APART WAS THE WAY I QUESTIONED WHAT I WAS TOLD AND PUSHED FOR MORE ANSWERS, FOR MORE DEPTH. I KNOW NOW THAT IT WAS THE CALL OF MY NESHAMAH.

public school system, came a little too late for me. I was placed in a mainstream classroom, where the teachers didn't make any accommodations. I learned how to read just like the other children did; the words were small and the print large. When I held the books close to my face, I was able to make out the letters.

When I reached third grade, I could no longer keep up with my classmates because I couldn't see the letters or numbers in the school books. Around that time, my mother remarried, and our somewhat chaotic home life became more settled. However, my mother worried a lot about me and tried to protect me, and she didn't want to let me play outside with the other children. She meant well, but I ended up having a hard time making friends.

Frustrated, I acted out in class; I talked, chewed gum and passed notes. My parents switched me to a private school, but the problem remained: I couldn't see well enough to learn in a mainstream classroom. My misbehavior escalated until, finally, my teacher told my parents that I needed to learn braille.

The Governor Morehead School for visually impaired

3 DAYS ONLY
SUNDAY, SEPT 11TH - TUESDAY, SEPT 13TH

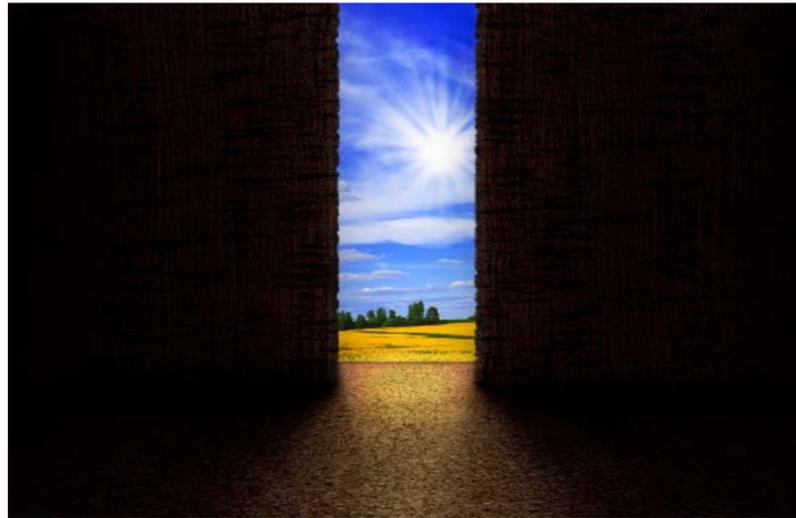
Anniversary SALE

STOREWIDE 30% OFF

TABLE & DECOR

order through whatsapp

347.746.8316 // 494 PARK AVE, BROOKLYN // @TABLEANDDECOR



students was a 20-minute drive from my home. I switched mid-year and stayed in that school for four years, until I graduated. Initially, I was placed in a class below my age level because I didn't know how to read or write in braille.

Like any language, braille is easier to learn when you're younger. It's read by moving the hands from left to right along raised dots that represent letters of the alphabet, equivalents for punctuation marks, and symbols for letter groupings.

When I started learning to read braille, I kept looking down at my hands, trying to see the dots as I touched them. My teacher, a very tall woman with vision in one eye and a prosthetic in place of the other one, hit my hand with her ruler to stop me from doing that. I know it's not correct to hit a child, but I have to admit that I'm glad she did, because I stopped relying on looking at the dots and learned how to read braille correctly. I mastered the code of 180 characters in six weeks, and then, as in print reading, I needed sustained practice in order to read braille quickly and smoothly. The first braille book I read on my own was *The Cat in The Hat*. A new world opened, and I rushed into it joyously.

Yet, even in the midst of other visually impaired students, I remained an outsider. Most of the students at this school boarded in the Spartan dorms,

whereas I was a day student who went home every night. And when I joined my sighted friends in extracurricular activities, I was the blind kid who went to a special school.

But I loved being part of things. Ballet—I didn't care that I was always the one with the wrong leg up or the one holding every position backwards. Horseback riding—the first time I rode a horse, it jumped and I fell off. My mother was horrified. I insisted on continuing, so she brought me to my lessons, but she didn't watch them.

There were other things I wanted to try, but I was told they were out of the question. I wasn't allowed on the school swim team. It bothers me that only 30% of blind people have jobs. Could it be because they're stopped from trying things when they're young?

That said, my mother wasn't wrong to worry. I begged for a bike, and when I was given one, I rode on the street like all the other kids. Except that I couldn't see the cars until they were dangerously close. It's a miracle that I survived my bike rides.

I wanted to learn how to bake. My stepfather said, "As long as she doesn't burn the house down, let her try." My mother used a felt tip pen (which has sharp contrast on paper) to write out my grandmother's recipe for chocolate pound cake in big letters on 5x7"

notecards, and I made that cake. I still have the recipe—and the memory of what it felt like to make it on my own.

I met my first Jewish friend in Girl Scouts. Janet's family was officially Conservative, but they were actually observant to some extent. When the Girl Scouts had an emergency preparedness program on a weekend, Janet said she couldn't come because it was on Shabbos. I'd never heard of Shabbos. The idea of a day disconnected from the rest of the world interested me. When Janet's father died, my parents brought me to her home during what I now know was *shivah*. I noticed the *mezuzah* on her door and wondered if it had magic in it.

My parents took me to church every week, and I sang in the church choir. As a preteen, I began to think about spirituality more seriously. It occurred to me that most people, even those who claim to be religious, lead shallow lives. I had so many questions! When my minister couldn't answer any of them...well, that was the end of that church for me. I explored Bahá'í and Greek Orthodox, and I also considered becoming a nun. I wanted more. But I didn't know what "more" looked like. Now, I view every one of the choices I made as roads that would, eventually, lead me home.

I attended a mainstream high school that made no accommodations for my disability. My parents spent four to six hours a day reading my school books to me. I was given tests like everyone else, but I had to pick up the paper and hold it to my face, which slowed me down. Often, even when I knew the answers, I only had time to complete half the test.

My mother hired a tutor, a girl a few years older than me—the daughter of our town's Conservative rabbi. She took me to her house on Purim, where I had my first taste of hamantashen. Her father was there too. I was gripped by an inexplicable yearning to go with them to their synagogue. They accommodated me, and I was thrilled by the melodious

FULL PAGE



SHE TOLD ME THAT SHE CELEBRATED BOTH JEWISH AND SECULAR HOLIDAYS. I DIDN'T KNOW MUCH, BUT THAT SEEMED WRONG—EITHER YOU'RE A JEW OR YOU'RE NOT.

reading of the *Megillah* and the unexpected (by me) racket of the *graggers*. This family, like Janet's, was also somewhat observant. They showed me that Judaism is more than going to services for two hours a week. It's a way of living. Theirs was my first impression of a holiday in a Jewish home, and fortunately, it was a good one.

For college, too, I went to mainstream universities. By then, there were some accommodations. I had readers who read my books to me; I was allowed more time to take tests, to be given some tests orally, and to use magnifying glasses to see papers letter by letter. I earned five degrees: MAs in fine arts, English education, comparative literature and vision teaching, and a PhD in comparative literature. I see it now as a confetti of information in an attempt to seek truth. Then, I was fascinated by critical thought and critical theory, but I cringe now when I realize how much damage that outlook is causing society today. The dissertation for my PhD that I took so seriously is garbage. But I was young and searching, and there's a lot of darkness out there.

I floundered for years. Studying. Working. I met another Conservative Jew, who told me that she celebrated both Jewish and secular holidays. That confused me. I didn't know much, but that seemed wrong—either you're a Jew or you're not.

I tried Zen, Daoism, Eastern religions. I attended an interfaith *Seder*. And I started to read as much as I could about Judaism. I've always had a strong moral sense. I was a flaming liberal, passionate about causes. I participated in civil rights activities, protested the Vietnam war, and insisted that the woman who cleaned our house sit at the table with us for meals. And I read and read. I was particularly drawn to mysticism, to writings on the soul. I taught myself to read Hebrew in braille. Right away, I knew Hebrew was different—it was holy.

After college, I moved to New York to run a poetry reading series with a

friend. On Chanukah, I walked around the Upper West Side, straining to see the lights of the menorahs.

(New York can be dangerous. Once, I had to take the subway home at about 2:00 a.m. I was alone and scared. So I did something crazy to protect myself. I waved my hands in front of my face, made strange noises, and shook my whole body. Everyone left the subway car to get away from me, and I got home safely. Later, I learned the story of Dovid Hamelech, who acted crazy in order to save himself from Avimelech.)

I taught braille to adults and children for 20 years. One of my first jobs, when I was in my early 20s, was teaching braille in an institution for adults newly-blinded by diabetes, accidents or genetics. Many of them were discouraged or depressed. I was young and didn't have the tools to deal with their psychological challenges. I've learned since then to encourage people with disabilities—and even to push them—to gain the skills they need to live productive lives.

I also taught typical kids in high school and college. Managing teenagers can be hard even for a fully-sighted person. I had 30 students in my high school class. I used braille notes and books to match their printed ones. I walked around the room constantly as I taught because I could only

see my students when I was right near them. I made a few versions of every test because I couldn't monitor them properly when they took tests. Once, when I was teaching in a college, a student was reading a newspaper during class. I asked her to put it away, and she ignored me. I walked over, still teaching, and casually used my cane to lift the newspaper and swoosh it into the air. I kept going without missing a beat of my lesson.

In the 1990s, I moved to Kentucky to teach. I was becoming more serious about converting, and I searched for a *shul* near my work because I'd read that Jews are not allowed to drive on Shabbos. I found a place two and a half miles from the Conservative synagogue, which was the only congregation I knew of at the time.

One Shabbos morning, when I was hurrying to the synagogue—I used a technique called shore lining, where I'd hit the curb with my cane and move very fast—I bumped into a woman. Literally bumped into her. She was also going to *shul*, and we started to talk. Natalie was the first *frum* woman I'd ever met. I didn't know the word *bashert* then, but I immediately sensed that something deep and powerful was taking place, though it would be 11 years from the time we met until I got it right. Natalie is still my *mashpia*. She claims that I guide her, too.

I don't know about that. But we learn together, and we're close.

In 1999, I underwent a Conservative conversion. The rabbi gave me three books, which I read, but he never asked me any questions about them. Even before the conversion, I was already challenging him, because the process seemed too fast and too easy. I asked him, "Excuse me, aren't you supposed to wait at least a year?" The Conservative experience was a huge disappointment. I was unhappy, and they were probably unhappy with me, too, because I became a big nudge.

I complained when they turned lights on and off on Shabbos. I was almost 40 years old, and I decided that I had to have a bas mitzvah. I asked them to help me with the preparations. The cantor taught me the *trop*, for which I created my own braille symbols. Even a blind

man who knows *trop* can't read from a *sefer Torah* because it can't be in braille. My bas mitzvah was on *Parshas Vay-akhel*. I, the new convert, gave a long *dvar Torah*, lecturing the mostly non-*shomer-Shabbos* crowd about keeping Shabbos. I'd ordered a catered meal and made sure no one carried any food out because there wasn't a kosher *eiruv*.

After five years in the Conservative movement, I'd had enough. On Chanukah 2006, I left in search of the real thing.

People ask me sometimes why I converted. I don't have an answer. When it comes to conversion, I think you have to want it more than anything else in your life. That's how it was for me. I felt that I *had* to do it. I spent a fortune on books on *halachah* and *hashkafah* so I could understand Shabbos and *kasbrus* and the rest. I paid readers to read them

to me.

Navigating as a blind person is a lot like finding my way around as a *giyores*. When blind people travel, they use a method called "structured discovery." It means they learn about a new environment one piece at a time: At first they go out, led by others; then, slowly, they learn new routes until it all becomes familiar. That's how I came to my *Yiddishkeit*—one small piece at a time. I kept trying, kept asking, kept doing my *bishtadlus*.

Natalie sent me to Rabbi Litvin of Chabad of Kentucky. He heard my story and said, "You know what it's like to be different." With his help, I did a *giyur* according to *halachah*. It's like being born. In 2010, I was, finally, fully, a Jew.

The *beis din* told me to choose a name. I chose Batya because of Batya, daughter of Pharaoh, and because it was

THE EMPOWERED WIFE

Six surprising secrets that will enhance your marriage and transform your life

Trained by Laura Doyle
(LDC) Rivky Kizelnik

For private coaching: (732) 300 - 5046





EVEN
PEOPLE WHO
ARE ABLE-
BODIED
HAVE
LIMITATIONS.
WE ALL
NEED EACH
OTHER IN
ONE WAY OR
ANOTHER.

similar to my given name, Bertha. I paired it with Miryam, spelled with a Y for the *yud*, the name of Hashem. It felt right to me. And I loved the stories of Miriam, how she sang and danced and led the women of her generation.

I own a collection of braille *sefarim* in Hebrew and English. Braille is bulky: a braille *siddur* is divided into 14 volumes. I only carry the part I need for weekday, Shabbos, or for each Yom Tov. When I *daven*, I read the words with my fingers, in Hebrew, while moving my lips. I also talk to Hashem from my heart. I feel very close to Hashem. Every morning, I ask for *brachos* for people who need them.

I own a full set of *Tanach*. I have a wish list of braille *sefarim*, including a Metsudah Chumash with *Rashi* and a *Hagaddah*. I'm starved for content.

In 2018, I took a trip to Israel on my own. I have a soft spot for Israelis. It was an Israeli who developed the technique for teaching cane travel to blind people. The first time I went up to the Kosel and touched the wall was so powerful. All around me, women were *davening*, crying. I felt connected; I felt like I belonged.

I joined the group of women in the *chevrah kaddisha* in Virginia. I completed the training to do *taharos*. Some of the members were concerned that my impaired vision would make me too slow or unable to help. But I did the *taharah* with them. It felt like an important way for me to do things for others.

As I'm aging, the minimal vision that I have is diminishing. I use text to speech assistive devices—my phone and my computer read my messages out loud to me. When I type, every keystroke and word is read out loud, too. And if I lose my phone, I call out to it and it answers me. In restaurants, I usually ask someone to read the menu to me because few of the kosher places have braille menus. The staff tends to get anxious, but I reassure them by sharing my technique—to read the food categories first,

etc., so it's easier and faster.

Baruch Hashem, I get by. My cane is hollow, so I sweep it as I go and can identify the texture of the objects around me by the sound it makes. I can also echo-locate, which means that if I pay attention I can hear cars and people. And there's always smell. I know when I'm passing certain stores because I can smell what they're selling.

Sure, my life would be easier if I could drive, but I feel Hashem with me all the time. I've had some serious transportation sagas. The time I walked into two feet of snow. The time I was hit by a car and thrown 100 feet, ending up with a brain bleed, a broken elbow, and a concussion. Hashem was with me. It wasn't easy, and I still suffer from that accident, but I lived to tell about it.

Since the accident, I lean into my *bitachon*, big time, when I have to cross a busy street. And it always works. I stand there, waiting, and someone—often a complete stranger—shows up and leads me across. It's miraculous.

People want to help, which is appreci-

ated, but sometimes they don't know how. I've had people lift me onto a bus instead of leading me, or pull me forward when I ask for directions in a store instead of explaining where to go.

The right way to be a human guide is to allow the blind person to hold onto the sighted person's elbow, while the sighted person walks half a step ahead so the blind person can know if there's a step or a corner coming up.

What really works well when confronted with people with a disability is to ask them what they need. People worry about embarrassing others by asking. I get that. But I want people to know that if people want to help me, it's much easier if they ask me what I need. It's usually a small thing. Like, if we're in a group, I'd like to know who is who. Or, if I'm in a store, it helps if someone reads packages for me, locates a *hechsher*, etc.

Ask. After all, even people who are able-bodied have limitations. We all need each other in one way or another.

The lockdowns during COVID were hard. I don't know other *frum* women who are blind, and I felt stuck and lonely. I kept asking Hashem, "Why?" I had to put in real effort not to despair. I forced myself to count the many *brachos* in my life—the wonderful people I've met, the way Hashem has led me and protected me.

A year ago, I moved to Deerfield Beach, Florida. I *daven* at the Chabad *shul*, and I've become part of the community. Before Purim, I told the *rebbeitzin*, "I want to help. Please give me something to do." She let me help prepare *mishloach manos*. She used a travel theme and, together, we assembled little trays that looked like airline food.

I love when people see the "me" beyond the blindness, when they realize that I'm much more than my disability. Seeing the person, seeing what we share—that's acceptance. That's love. That's what we need for this world to heal. That's what we need for the *Beis Hamikdash* to be rebuilt. Everyone can see that. □