

REVIEWS

Stumbling Upward

A convert's mid-faith crisis

In the Israeli society of which I am a part, there is an entire lexicon devoted to those whose religious practice is different from that of their parents and upbringing: from *baalei teshuva* (masters of repentance) who grew up secular and “returned” to Jewish tradition, to *hozrim b'she'eila* (returning with questions) and *datlashim* (*datiim l'she-avar*, formerly religious) who abandon their religious observance for a secular lifestyle. As these terms reflect, it is increasingly common to challenge or change one's religious identity, though few experience the seismic shifts documented in the spiritual autobiographies of Lauren Winner.

Winner, a historian of religion and an ordained Episcopal priest, is the author of several books on religious faith, most recently *Still: Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis* (Harper One, \$24.99). Here she continues the journey she began in *Girl Meets God*, where she described how she was raised

of Orthodox Jews.” Then, as a scholar of literature, she found herself increasingly drawn to the idea of the incarnation: “Embodiment was the novelistic culmination of anthropomorphism... If you are a good novelist, you give God hands and eyes.” Winner became a devout Christian and a professor at an American divinity school. And then she got divorced.

Still does not dwell on Winner's divorce, except insofar as this experience—coupled with the trauma of her mother's death—brought her to a spiritual crisis, the kind in which “the things you thought you knew about the spiritual life turn out not to suffice for the life you are actually living.”

Winner paints a moving and honest picture of “wrestling with a God who isn't there, or maybe who is: what do you do in the midst of this absence? Where do you go?” Her reflections—on prayer, on loneliness and intimacy, on the middle parts of a journey—are movingly and passionately rendered, and she writes with surprising insight into both Judaism and

to observe is also the only holiday that the traditional Jewish sages say will still be observed in the World-to-Come: the masquerade holiday of Purim, when she can show up at synagogue incognito.

Still pulses with the spiritual intensity of a Marilynne Robinson novel though it lacks the sophisticated engagement with specific Jewish and Christian texts and practices that distinguished *Girl Meets God* from other spiritual autobiographies. This is a shame, because few can write as knowledgeably and insightfully about both Judaism and Christianity as Lauren Winner, whose reading of the *midrashim* on the Book of Ruth is as informed as her analysis of the symbolism of Ash Wednesday. (And who else besides Winner would host a “Tikun Leyl Pentecost,” adopting the Jewish practice of staying up all night to study religious texts?) Nonetheless, her new book, described by Winner's publisher as “lessons in stumbling upward,” has an honesty and a humility borne of pain that has the power to speak to anyone—*ba'al teshuva*, *datlash*, or evangelical Christian—who has ever felt surprised by or bereft of God.

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A Reform Jew who converted first to Orthodoxy, then to Evangelical Christianity, tells why it's easier to read about prayer than to pray.

a Reform Jew by her Jewish father and Southern Baptist mother and converted first to Orthodox Judaism and then to evangelical Christianity. Her conversion to Judaism was the product of increasing engagement with Jewish learning and Jewish prayer throughout her adolescence and into her undergraduate years at Columbia, a college she chose “not because it had a pretty campus or a good lacrosse team or a favorable male-to-female ratio, but because it had hundreds

of Christianity. “Because it is easier to read about prayer than to pray, I have shelves full of books,” she confesses, implicating her readers in her predicament. She considers the ways in which we often find ourselves too busy to engage with God, arguing that the modern condition of being too busy all the time is the equivalent to the deadly sin of sloth. And she confesses that she continues to long for the rhythms and routines of the Jewish calendar; the one holiday she continues

Marrying to Rescue

Teens in Mandate Palestine

Several years ago, when my daughter was in middle school and Israel was very much in the news, I was struck by the dearth of young adult fiction that might help her understand its complexities. Thankfully the Israeli author Nava Semel has made solid contributions in this category with *Flying Lessons*, *Becoming Gershona*, and *And the Rat Laughed*. Her latest novel, *Paper Bride* (Hybrid Publishers, \$25), joins the list of books imaginatively presenting Israel's early history and background to young readers.