

## Putting on the Dog

*You are not obliged to put on evening clothes to meet God.*  
— Isaac Bashevis Singer

### ***A Question for the Rebbe***

In 2004, I went to Queens, New York, to visit the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. I had come from Seattle with a question for the Rebbe. I wanted to know if we should send Noah, my oldest son, to a secular school or keep him in a Jewish school. If the Rebbe answered a Jewish school, my husband and I needed to know which one of the three Jewish schools in Seattle. I needed an immediate answer, a sign, a hint, a vision, or a message. We only had two weeks before we had to put down a \$2,000 nonrefundable deposit.

I walked into the reception area of a modest brick house on the edge of a cemetery on a steamy spring day. I wore a long, brown skirt, an apple-green long-sleeve top, a pair of bronze boots, and had my hair tucked under a straw hat. Under my arms, were two perfect half-moon sweat stains.

Men wearing black suits, white shirts, and black hats, and women wearing long skirts, long-sleeve shirts with high necklines, and scarves, hats, or wigs sat watching videos of the Rebbe's talks. Some took notes and some wrote letters. Some rocked or swayed as they listened with fierce attention. I sat for a while looking into the Rebbe's clear blue eyes, catching about one out of every four Yiddish words. I took paper and a pen from my small black rubber bag and wrote a note as much to myself as to the Rebbe, "Should we send Noah to a Jewish school?"

I moved into the next room where there were six long cafeteria tables with people sitting, schmoozing, eating, drinking coffee, sipping tea, and leaning over large volumes of the Talmud rocking and studying in the singsong voice of Torah study. I saw a young couple standing next to each other in a way that implied that they were not brother and sister and, yet, I knew they were not married as the woman's hair was uncovered. I overheard someone say, "They're here for a *bracha* from the Rebbe." I followed them into the back of the room presumably toward the Rebbe where a sign read: PLEASE REMOVE SHOES. I pulled my hot feet out of my boots, lit a candle, and entered the women's side of the *Ohel*, a tent over the Rebbe's gravesite. I recited psalms and quietly read a letter that I had written to the Rebbe. When I finished reading it, I tore it up and let the scraps of paper float down into the plain unadorned concrete square that held other shredded letters above the Rebbe's body. There were bits of notes in Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian, English, French, Farsi, Spanish, and other languages that I didn't recognize. I stayed for at least forty minutes watching people come and go. I watched the young

couple, the young woman next to me and the young man across from us on the men's side, praying with fervor, their eyes tightly shut, their lips moving rapidly with an occasional hum escaping. On my way out of the tent, I felt a ping in my left ovary. A sign? Certainly the Rebbe didn't expect me to have another child at forty-three.

I walked out of the house and down a block to where my husband and a friend were waiting for me. In half a block I noticed that it went from black-hatted Jewish men with their long-sleeved and long-skirted wives to brown, black, tan, and olive-skinned people speaking Spanish. A Hasidic man, with a long black coat, a fur-trimmed hat, and ringlets called *payus* dangling in front of his ears, was behind me speaking rapidly in Yiddish.

"*Bhruklin?* You going to Bhruklin?" He asked insistently in English. Before I realized he was speaking to me, I had pulled off my hat and was standing bareheaded scratching my hot scalp. I turned and saw his face fall. It was too late to jam my frizzy-curly hair back under my hat.

"Manhattan," I said. His disgust was palpable.

I climbed into the car carrying the same question that I had when I left Seattle.

\* \* \*

## ***Citizen***

I wear Citizen jeans and cords--tight, yet, with enough room for my ass and enough fabric to cover my twenty-two-and-a-half-inch thighs. My thighs are larger than my mother's twenty-inch waist was when she married my father in 1950 at the age of twenty.

I'm now forty-eight, five-foot-one-inch, and weigh around 130 pounds. I don't know for sure because we don't own a scale and never have. My husband, for an assortment of reasons, doesn't want a scale, will not discuss weight, or tell me if my ass looks big.

Hence, I've worn the same pants for close to ten years, not just the same size of pants, but literally the same pair of mustard cords and the same pair of black-velvet pants--both by Citizen, bought on the same day in a boutique in Ballard in northwest Seattle. My clothes have always told me what a scale would tell me if I owned one. A month ago, I put my finger through my mustard cords, an inch below the waistband, as I was dragging them over my hips. The other day, I found a hole in the back pocket of my black pants. Now what measure will I use?

\* \* \*

## ***Warrior Slays Downward Dog in Lululemon***

I started yoga in 1988, before yoga was hip, when only spiritual seekers, hippies, and the injured were practicing. I started yoga in a small drafty studio near Green Lake, next to the Honey Bear Bakery, and close enough to the lake to walk off my guilt. I started yoga when it was as much about the postures as it was about the coffee, the conversation, and the sour-cream coffeecake. I started yoga when a class cost eight dollars, and there were no such things as yogawear--no yoga pants, no yoga shirts, no yoga socks, and no yoga skirts. Back then I wore tight black leggings that made my thighs look like blood sausages and a baggy T-shirt from some walk, jog, dance or other-a-*thon*. Now, twenty-three years later, I shop at Lululemon and pay seventy dollars a pop for a boot-cut booty-shaping pair of leggings. I wear a black T-shirt on top of a red, white, brown, navy, or green tank--this ensemble costs more than one hundred dollars. As far as I can tell it doesn't do a thing for my poses.

\* \* \*

## ***Purim Story No. 1***

On the Jewish holiday of Purim this year, my husband and I celebrated our 22nd wedding anniversary. Purim is a story of good over evil set in ancient Persia with a villain named Haman, a minister to the king, who is out to annihilate the Jews. There's King Achashverosh whose wife, Queen Vashti, has refused to parade naked through the king's grand banquet and is killed. There's Esther, a closeted Jew, whom the king chooses to replace Queen Vashti. There's Esther's Uncle Mordechai, who poses as Esther's father. The story heats up when Mordechai refuses to bow down to Haman (on account of an idol hanging from Haman's neck). In the end, Esther, with coaching from Mordechai, saves her people, Haman is killed, Mordechai is honored by the king, and Esther becomes known as the savior of the Jewish people. The holiday is celebrated with community revelry, a recitation of the story, a donning of costumes, fasting, eating, pranking, playing tricks, and for some, drinking until one is unable to tell the difference between blessed Mordechai and cursed Haman.

This year, I decided to surprise my husband and dress as Queen Vashti. I took my calf-length ivory-lace wedding dress out of the closet, dropped my leggings, pulled off my T-shirt, bunched the dress up and put it over my head. I slid it down over one shoulder than the other. I wriggled my arms into the sleeves and began inching the three-layer dress over my boobs, a single layer at a time. I sucked in my gut and willed my hips to narrow. I eased the fabric with my fingertips over my curves,

contours, bulges, and dips. I sucked in a final time, knit my ribs together, and struggled with the zipper. I got it halfway up when it occurred to me that the dress might fit better with the proper undergarments. I unzipped, grabbed the bottom of the dress--rolled it back over my belly, hips, thighs, boobs, and up to my shoulders when it got stuck. "Steve! Steve!" I called. No response. I walked downstairs in my black underwear and black socks, holding onto the oak banister, with the dress over my head.

"I need help," I yelled this time.

"I'll say you do. Boys should we leave your mother this way?"

"Sure," Noah giggled.

"No. That's not nice," my youngest son Shiah said.

"How the heck did you do this?" Steve asked as he tried to free me.

"Careful," I said through the ivory-lace layers wrapped around my head.

Steve inched the fabric up and off of me while suggesting that the dress must have shrunk in the closet. I sulked back upstairs in my black socks and underwear with my dress over my shoulder. I examined the dress in the bathroom. The shoulders had ridiculously thick shoulder pads. Without them, I decided I'd have more room for my arms. I took out fingernail scissors and began cutting the satin on the inside of the dress until I had a hole large enough to excise the wad of cotton batting. I put on a pair of tight black bike shorts to hold in my midsection and took off my bra and let my boobs down.

Again, I dropped the dress over my head, gathered the fabric in my hands and lowered it over my shoulders and on down until I was in and zipped. One look in the mirror told me to get out quickly.

\* \* \*

## ***Seminary***

In 1979, I left Seattle for *Neveh Yerushaliem*, a women's seminary in Israel with my best friend Patti Calderon *zikhronha l'vrakha* of blessed memory. I was seventeen and had just graduated from high school. Patti was a year older and had been in New York for a year at Stern College. We left for the airport directly from our friend Ann's wedding. Ann, also of blessed memory, had begged us to dance with her and her husband Daniel at their wedding before we left.

Patti and I arrived in Jerusalem on a suffocating August day. We were in the land of the holy, in a religious girls' school, and we were required to dress modestly at all times. Patti had a large

lovely chest and no matter what she wore drew attention. I on the other hand had no such issues. I filled a 32A cup if I leaned forward and squeezed my upper arms into the sides of my chest.

One day I was leaving *Pirkei Avot*, Ethics of Our Fathers class--when the teacher whose name I have long forgotten--asked to speak to me. She was a beautiful, tall, reedy woman wearing a long-tailored dress that looked like it came from a Talbot's catalog.

"Yocheved, may I speak to you for a moment?"

"Sure," I answered a bit surprised.

"I know that you are a religious girl," she began, "so I want to tell you that your shirt is too tight and is immodest."

I was wearing an off-white knit turtleneck with a white bra underneath. The sleeves went to my wrists and the collar to my chin. Never had I thought about anything being too tight on me.

I have no idea what I said, but I rushed back to tell the girls at the dorm about my scolding. For months, I had been perfecting my imitation of this teacher and, now, I had new material to work. Back in my room, I stared at the mirror, squinted, turned to the side. I saw nothing--not the faintest outline of a nipple, not a wrinkle, and barely a wave in the fabric as it curved around my breasts.

\* \* \*

## ***Purim Story No. 2***

This past Purim--the same Purim that found me attempting to slip into my ivory-lace wedding dress as the reincarnated, lovely, and liberated Queen Vashti--I arrived at a Belltown condo for a *Megillah* reading and Purim cocktail party wearing my black cords, now with holes in both back pockets; a white long-sleeve T-shirt (because I don't own a white blouse); a grey tie; a black jacket similar to a man's suit jacket; and a black Fedora.

I had pulled out a bit of hair from behind each ear, wetted the clumps and twisted them around my index fingers. I pinned both sections above my ears to dry. When I removed the bobby pins, I had two perfect *payus* that fell down the sides of my face. I put on a black Fedora that I bought from a thrift store and a touch of black honey lip gloss and left the house looking like I a prepubescent boy from Brooklyn.

\* \* \*

## ***Baby & Co.***

Baby Burstyn was my first and only fashion idol. I first set eyes on her at synagogue in the early seventies when I was around fourteen or fifteen, and she was probably in her late twenties. She wore black fishnet hose, tight short black dresses in sheer fabrics, plunging necklines, asymmetrical hemlines, black platform shoes, and black suede boots. She let her long, black curly hair swing freely while most of the married women wore hats, wigs, lace mantillas, and scarves to cover their hair as was the custom of the congregation. Baby was a walking contradiction to the row of wealthy handsome women in veiled hats wearing charcoal, black, and navy blue suits.

Baby was sexy and wild and round and unpredictable and unpretentious and unafraid to wear layers and layers of whatever she wanted whether anyone else was wearing it. She wore skirts with leggings before anyone knew what leggings were. Her style was French and witty and beautiful and ironic and artistic and original. When she and her husband Uri opened Baby & Co. in 1976, a high-end boutique at the corner of First and Virginia, I was in high school. I counted the years until I had enough money to make my first purchase, a long printed batik Vivienne Tam skirt--inky-blue and off-white with a black layer of the same crepe material underneath. I've worn it through two pregnancies, one bris, countless parties, and twenty years later, I'm still wearing it.

\* \* \*

## ***Purim Story No. 3***

At the Belltown Purim party, I watched a tall lithe woman in a body-skimming frosted blue dress, black fishnet hose, and a pair of black pumps with a considerable heel. She had short platinum blonde hair worn in a flip. When she turned around, I saw that she was a he.

Across the room was a tall big-boned brunette woman who was leaning against a wall with her partner. Her face was long, her nose sharp, her hands large, her voice low, and her skin a bit rough. She was dressed in a skirt, blouse, and sweater vest. She had once been Mark and now she was Miriam. A beautiful statement of change-- refreshingly normal and open about what she had been through to become a woman.

When I told my friend Roz about the costumes and alterations, she said, "Strict gender identity is giving way. Younger people are more flexible."

\* \* \*

## ***Thread Count***

When I was young my mother worked for my father's family business, Lawson Manufacturing, a coat company headquartered on Bellevue Avenue on Capitol Hill. The coats they made were wool, cashmere, and camel hair. They were sold at Nordstrom, Frederick & Nelson, and I. Magnin. As a kid, before the start of the school year, I would go to the factory, and my Uncle Harry would lift me onto the cutting table and size me for a new coat. I'd go on my way with a new navy peacoat or a camel-hair little boy's coat.

Somewhere I learned to rub material between my thumb and forefinger to detect synthetic blends. In Israel in the Jerusalem Arab Market I learned to light a match to a corner of fabric. If it went up in flames it was not a natural fabric. I look at buttons, buttonholes, and zippers with the careful eye of a jeweler before I buy anything. My mother's mother was also the daughter of a tailor. She would inspect seams and shake her head if there was a single loose thread or a sloppy line.

\* \* \*

## ***Torah Dressing***

I bought a Torah on Ebay for \$6,500 for a new Jewish community that I helped to create. The Torah was written in Poland before the Second World War, made its way to Ramat Gan in Israel after the war, and on a Saturday morning in February 2007 arrived on my front porch in a box that was torn and dented. Noah and I ran down to the rabbi's house with a question. What does one do with a Torah that arrives on Shabbas in a busted up box?

The Torah's red velvet mantle was frayed, the wooden rollers were broken, the parchment worn in areas, and letters had rubbed off from use. We hired a *sofer*, a scribe and Torah repairperson from Israel, to come to Seattle to perform the repairs. She arrived with a quill, ink, and *gid*, kosher sinew, required to sew the parchment.

This year we're working with an artist in Chicago to create a new mantle. We're measuring, sizing, sketching, designing, and selecting fabric, trim, and thread. The process is as involved, exacting, and as expensive as having a dress made to order.