

Creative Contest: „Christian-Jewish Dialogue –
Why? What for?

Contribution by
Orian Assayag

What my father taught me

To Jens

In the elementary school where I grew up there were only Jewish religious girls. We all wore skirts that covered our knees and shirts that covered our elbows. I didn't get along with the girls in my class; I hated them and they hated me. They despised me and I despised them in my heart. I felt that they were dumb and I didn't lose anything by not socializing with them.

The breaks between classes bothered me because I didn't know what to do, which emphasized the no-place place I had in the social hierarchy. It's not that I was at the bottom, I just wasn't in the hierarchy at all, because I didn't accept the social elite and didn't suck up to them. As time passed, very early books came into my life, and it then stopped bothering me. I read during breaks and the voices of the girls gradually disappeared around me as I went deeper into the pages. I would read every class break. To each school trip I brought a book so I could read on the bus or during socializing time.

At the age of 11 I got a position at the school: I was responsible for censoring the school library. I had to read all the new books before they were to enter the library. My responsibilities were: A. to recommend if the book would be appropriate for us, young girls, to read. I had to make sure it didn't contain obscene content or reflect negative values. B. If the book got approved, I had to go through the book and erase obscene words in black ink. Words that were clearly "not for us", like curses and sexual terms, but also words that could refer to the sexual world somehow. For example: Body organs such as butt, breasts, and the inside of the thigh. It would have been better to erase with whiteout first and then mark it over with black marker. However, curious girls could hold that page when it was apart from the other pages in front of a strong light and with some difficulty, though still possible, they could read the forbidden word that was hidden there.

When teacher Osnat informed me that this will be my new job, I was so excited that I could now read the books before they were censored without having to use the lamp trick. But more than anything, I was glad I could read the forbidden, banned, books; the ones which were never included in the school library.

I wanted to please the management and show them how pious and loyal I was. To prove to them that they chose the right girl for that responsibility. Therefore, I banned many books and I censored books more strictly than I was asked for. The amount of seemingly obnoxious books I read made my mother angry at the school for giving me this job. "I don't understand it", she said. "Why don't they think about my daughter's soul?" Should you sacrifice yourself for the rest?". It was hard to please all the adults in my life at that time, but the free access to the library, and the unmarked virgin books, smelling of ink and new paper, that I was receiving almost every day from the school secretary and rushing back to class to put them in my school bag, all of this conveyed a wave of happiness I wasn't familiar with until then.

/

I grew up in a religious family. Both of my parents were born in North Africa and education was valuable at home. However, it was not as important as the good virtues of a man, which was the highest thing one could be blessed with. Emotional intelligence, too, was considered much more than education. But still, education was something that we, children, were directed towards, even though its importance was a little vague. It had this double or mixed attitude. It will grant you with good opportunities, and gaining knowledge is appreciated. But there is still a lot of suspicion towards the western modern concept of education as enlightenment. "He is a Professor? Ok, nice. But how is he as a 'human'? Does he distinguish between good and right? I am not impressed, I am not worshipping the University". He answered to my sister when she told him about a guy she met that his father is a History professor.

The secular school classes, like math or English, were mainly for "getting something out of you so you will not end up working in that garbage truck".

The central value of my school, the reason why my parents sent me there, was mostly for the religious studies that we had, a few hours each day. Still, at home, education in its broad sense did mean something. I am talking about classic, European, conventional education.

Some areas of education were considered of high value, such as: history, geography, psychology, and languages, but philosophy for example, was considered an abomination. It was depicted to me by my parents like the snake from the story of Adam and Eve. It is a sort of predator that speaks in human tongue and in a friendly manner, talking straight to your confused heart and makes you lose your way home. It represented the Greek culture, the mother of Western culture, whom we thought of as something corrupt and as the mythological enemy of the Jewish people from the old times till the end of days.

In my home, people were suspicious towards the waves of forgiven "voices" that the wind had carried into our home. Anything, from an academic theory to an advertisement on radio, that had something in it which smelled of individuality ("You deserve this nice car!"), sexuality or liberalism ("Women should wear whatever they want!"), made my mother look bothered, as if she smelled a bad smell. My mother would then turn to us children, and say: "In the past, there were no washing machines, and people had to work really hard and spend a lot of time in order to have this", she would say and point at a mountain of clean clothes that waited on the sofa to be folded. "Nowadays they made up the washing machine which saves so much time for people. But what do people do with all this free time now?"

/

I knew what I was doing, I was reading, all of the time. I hated to help at home: To cook, to help with the eternal mountain of clean clothes on the sofa that my sisters were constantly folding. I had no interest in sorting the rice and sifting the flour for potential insects that might be there. But on those hectic Fridays I was obliged to participate in the work. I would sort the rice and later on my mother would sort the same rice after me, "How can I trust you with the rice?", my mother would say. "How can I take the chance? This is the rice for Shabbat! And you'll check it with one eye and the other eye you use for the book!". She was right, I had a book with me, always. The girls in my class would not agree to go anywhere without company. I never needed that; I had a book.

My parents were suspicious towards whatever came from the outside - people, food, and ideas, but they were never suspicious of my books. They had some genuine simple trust in books. For them, reading books was simply good. Our whole house was full of books. None of them looked new. Books were everywhere, from the living room, to the kitchen, covering the walls of the corridor. There was even a shelf of books in the toilet, where my mother kept her astrology books. My father wanted her to get rid of those books, so they settled for that.

I had a membership in our local library where I would sometimes go after school to loan books and one of my parents would drive me there. Until I was 14 years old, I only read children's or teen's books, but I was very curious about the adult books section which stretched to the right side of the library. Tall and large, and wide and dark, like a forbidden forest. It was filled with an endless amount of books, much more books than the section of the teens had. The books there looked different, so serious and inaccessible, they seemed to me like adulthood itself. I was strictly not allowed to borrow books from the adult section. All the librarians knew me by name, and they knew that my parents were strongly disapproving of me reading adult's books. I couldn't understand why, what could be written there which is not for me to read yet? Stories are stories! What is so special about the stories the adults read?

Once, when I was waiting in line in the teen's section, I saw on the librarian's counter a book from the adult section. On its cover was a painted figure of a seductive woman with thick blond hair, she was wearing only her underwear, and next to her you could see a shadow of a big man watching her. I quickly turned my eyes away from this book. I was blushing, checking out if someone saw me

looking at that book. At that moment, I felt like right there, right in front of my eyes, I met the abomination. I had some sort of a vague feeling of why adults' books are "problematic".

/

Once, when I was 14, I entered the dark forest of the adult books' section. It wasn't out of my own initiative. I was standing in one of the hidden and dusty corners of the teens' section, reading from a book by Astrid Lindgren, and suddenly a young man appeared in front of me, and stopped, he asked me "what are you reading?". It might sound casual, but I hardly knew any boy back then. When he approached me like that, I could hardly breathe for a second. It was strictly forbidden to have a male friend, and it was simply impossible to get to know any boy since I studied only with girls since I was 6 years old and I never went to any sort of activity which included a mixed group of boys and girls.

If a random guy would turn to me and say something, keeping long eye contact with me, after a few minutes my heart would start beating fast. I would feel as if his gaze was itching my face. The idea of him still looking at me after I turned away my eyes would give me an unbearable sensation. I couldn't give a name to that sensation, but it made me feel myself in a whole different way. Every sentence or word that I said to him, or that I knew might arrive to this boy's ears, kept on ringing in my head for so long afterwards. My mind would be flooded with involuntary thoughts "my hair is lying strangely on my head, I am sure he can see the wired impression on my face".

This guy introduced himself "I am Daniel". He wanted to shake my hand, but I refused. I told him I do not touch men, it was forbidden. My voice sounded so unnatural to me when I spoke to him, I said a sentence but straight afterwards I felt that it was a stupid thing to say. Daniel seemed interested in listening to me. He told me that he noticed me coming to the library very often, it seemed to him that I was reading many books and he was curious to know which books I was reading. I led him in the dusty and curved maze of the teen's books section, showing him my favourite books. If we were not speaking about books I would have not been able to hold a conversation with a handsome young guy for so long, it would have been too intimidating for me. But he seemed truly interested in listening to what I had to say about these books that I loved so much, loved as friends, asking me again and again, "What do you like in this book?", or "how do you feel about this character?". After I showed him a few of my favourite books, it was his turn to show me his favourite ones and he took me to the adults' books section. That was my first time entering there.

/

I didn't know any of the books he showed me. The last book he presented to me was the most important for him, he said. He told me that this is an old book on the thoughts of a wise Jewish man who was living in Amsterdam many years ago. He said that he thought I would be interested in it since the man who wrote it was also interested in the Torah, and many of his thoughts are actually about God. He himself was not familiar with the Torah, he said, and therefore, many terms in this book are not clear for him. He asked if I could explain some terms to him that he could not understand. I agreed. We found a quiet corner in the reading section, and we opened the book. Studying it was familiar somehow to the Torah classes I had in school, and I enjoyed it. It felt weird and special to explain to a man, for the first time in my life, terms about the Torah and not the other way around. When we finished that day, Daniel asked me if I would like to have this studying happen on every Tuesday afternoon. I was sure it was forbidden for me to sit so close to a man, for so long, and exchange so many things with him, even though it was for the sake of studying Torah, but I agreed. This is how I started to study *Ethica* by Spinoza, every Tuesday evening.

Daniel was 16 years old, and he was attending the Democratic high school. I never heard of it before. He got to choose which subjects to learn and when. I was very sceptical of this idea. "How do you know what is good for you?", I asked him. "I just learn what I like to learn," he said. This was very odd to me. Once my father and I met our neighbour and her little daughter in the stairway. The girl was dressed up in a princess costume, for no reason, Purim was still far in the calendar. The mother told us, proudly, "She gets to choose what to wear by herself!". When we arrived home my father said, "Nowadays to educate your children, to teach them how to choose properly, to tell them what is

good and what is bad, right and wrong, today it is out of fashion. Poor little girl. I hope she doesn't eat candies all day". In our home we would get candies at the beginning of each new moon, to celebrate the new month. Aside for that, if we wanted to get something sweet we could only snack dates, or sneak to the neighbour's house and convince their children to give us some of their snacks.

Daniel and I would meet every Tuesday afternoon and stay until the library was about to close. *Ethica* was not easy to study, but I loved the struggle. It was like climbing a mountain with your own bare hands. The Torah studying in my girls' school resembled more an eating of food which has already been "chewed" for you. Daniel and I would have to read a short part, explain it to each other, and then start to argue and discuss it. We almost never agreed. Daniel claimed that it seems as if Spinoza had a problem with God, I thought he misunderstood him, it was all about God. There is nothing but God, I said.

/

A few days after I turned 15 I arrived at the library as usual on Tuesday. We had our studying going on together, in our dusty corner. After an hour we felt a man standing next to us, listening. I turned my eyes and I saw my father standing there. I wished I was dead, I felt like a thief being caught in the midst of a crime. Sitting so close to a young man, speaking with him freely, addressing each other by our first names. My father seemed calm, he approached us with a friendly smile and shook Daniel's hand. "So what is it that you are studying?" he was asking. When he got to see the book, his face turned black. "Philosophy" he said. I was shocked, is this philosophy? This whole time I was eating from the forbidden fruit? I thought it is Torah that we are studying.

On our way back my father was not speaking so much. He didn't mention it. It was a bad sign. I wish he would have yelled at me in anger. "What did you do in the library?" I asked him. "I came to make a copy of some pages in an Aramaic-French dictionary" he said. "I am preparing a Torah lesson for a group of young Jewish French boys who came to volunteer in the kibbutz of your uncle, we will study Talmud together". My father knew French and he knew the Talmud very well, everyone respected him for his knowledge in Talmud. But my father himself was not impressed by his knowledge, he rather admired a red head man he met once in Strasburg in a tiny synagogue. "If I would stick a pin in one of the books of the Talmud, this man could tell me exactly in which words the pin is gonna hit. That is how much this man knows Talmud!".

When we arrived home my father turned to me and said, "Look, in life you can go many roads. You can choose to go to the library in order to prepare a Talmud lesson, to study Torah together with young people as a guidance for life, or you could be one of those who sit all day and wonder about the purpose of life, and doubting God. It never brings any good to their life. But to study Spinoza... Didn't you know that is forbidden? That the Rabbis of that time in Amsterdam banned every Jew from reading his books? This is the worst sort of philosophy you could find, this is heresy! It is worse than studying Christianity! I would rather you read the new testament than this"

/

What did I know back then? Could I imagine to myself that a few years afterwards I would be sitting and studying the New Testament? And not only that. Could I imagine that I would be doing it in a catholic monastery, together with nuns? I could never imagine that back then.

After my father gave me this short speech, he never mentioned it again. I felt sick; I felt as if I crossed a very important border. I thought to myself: "No wonder. It comes as no surprise that a girl who dares to speak so freely with a man she doesn't know, will end up studying the most heretical text of all time". I decided to fast every Tuesday in order to repent. The only thing that my father did was to start studying Talmud with me. He told me that even though it is forbidden for women to study this, it seems that I have a strong desire for knowledge and it is better that this desire be nourished by "our great tradition" so I won't need to "graze in foreign fields ". I never studied with Daniel again, I didn't tell him anything, I never came to the library again on Tuesdays.

My studying with my father started as weekly sessions, but very fast turned into twice a week. Then we started to study on Shabbat. Eventually, I was studying Talmud 3-4 times a week. I would dream in Aramaic, and I would amuse myself sometimes in translating my childhood fiction, as the Moomins' tales, into Aramaic. The Talmud became my life. When I finished high school I went to travel in Europe together with Sarah, a good friend of mine, who had relatives in Paris. It was during the High Holidays that we were staying there, by her relatives, and it was on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, that I came across Nina.

Nina was the first cousin of Sarah's grandmother. I was shocked when I was introduced to her by Sarah's family on Rosh Hashanah's eve. There, at the holiday table sat Nina, an old Catholic nun, in traditional black garb. I hid my surprise. But the question burned inside of my head: How come Sarah had a Catholic nun as a relative? During the whole evening that question wouldn't leave my mind. The whole evening seemed surreal to me. Here the Catholic nun is holding the apple with honey in her hand. Here the catholic nun is blessing the new year with everyone else. But why? What is she doing here? I went to the balcony to breathe fresh air. Sarah came after me and told me that Nina was a young teen when the war started, and she had been hidden in a monastery in the countryside of France, there she met God, she had an epiphany and became a nun when she was 17.

/

I was shocked. I looked at Nina behind the glass door, she was gently speaking with a young kid who was sitting next to her. I felt pain, it surprised me. "Isn't it similar to losing her in the war? Isn't it as if the Nazis managed to take her, still, somehow?" I asked Sarah. Sarah took a deep breath. "Sometimes I think that you have been raised in a bubble. As if you grew up inside a book. Look at her, look at Nina, look how she is part of us. I remember her from every family gathering, I have known her since I was born. When I meet Catholic people I tell them about Nina and you know what? It makes us feel closer. You must get to know her".

Sarah introduced us. It was hard for me to look at Nina's face. I kept thinking of how she had been kidnapped by the church. I wanted to save her, I wanted to tell her that there are few paths in life, and that she is Jewish, she needs to choose the right path in life. I was having difficulty conversing casually with her, the first Catholic nun I met, and Jewish! When Sarah mentioned my extensive knowledge in Talmud, Nina lit up. She turned to me and said "I've been trying to understand Talmud ever since I was in my twenties, but never managed. Also, I never met a woman who knows Talmud! How come you know Talmud?" I didn't want to, but somehow, maybe because of the stress I was in, I started to tell her about Daniel, and my father's initiative. She was much focused when I was speaking, she was attentive. When I finished she said, "Your father was right. What good is it to doubt God? It is so much better he taught you Talmud instead of philosophy".

I didn't expect that. I felt the need to confront Nina a little bit, so I added "he also told me back then that he would rather see me studying the New Testament than study Spinoza, so... I guess...", I didn't know how to finish my sentence. Nina didn't react to that. Our conversation continued, it became deeper and intimate. It approached the end of the holiday meal. Some children ran around and their tired mothers ran after them, trying to get them ready to leave. An old man was lying down on the sofa, taking a nap, and a young boy with long hair lay his head on his lap, sleeping.

Nina looked at me, there was a special light shining from her eyes. I was attracted and charmed by the light and warmth that Nina had in her. But I was blocked by the bitter awful feeling that this Jewish woman is a walking tragedy, the outcome of Nazi plan. Her black garb, the necklace she was wearing, made me turn my eyes down when I started to feel connection with her. I never addressed it directly to her, but I knew she felt, I knew she sensed where I was. "I am a Christian" she told me, looking deeply into me, her eyes were full of honesty and faith, "I do believe in the Old Testament, but I base my life on the other one. I have experienced things that you haven't and you might never understand what I experienced." I didn't say anything and she continued. "You had been studying texts your whole life, texts that I have so much desire to understand, but I had no father who would explain them to me, so I never managed to learn it".

I don't know how it happened. Maybe it is because Rosh Hashanah is a very long holiday. On the second night we sat on the couch, wearing pyjamas, eating apples and dates and had a conversation until 3 am. Her pyjama was a long light blue dress, her hair is white and curly. I forgot how old she was, her movement was light and when she laughed it came from a deeply happy and free place in her. She reminded me of my first grade beloved teacher who was a professional marionette artist and used to tell us never ending great stories while mimicking all characters in the story.

After Rosh Hashanah ended I agreed to accompany Nina back to her monastery and stay with her for a while, teaching her Talmud. I received a small room with a view to the garden. I had to work in the garden for a few hours each day and I loved it. I never touched the soil so much before. The soil here is black and shiny, and it smells of freshness. It is now almost the end of Sukkot, and I am still here. I haven't told my parents about this visit. I don't know how I can tell them about it, they will be shocked. But I feel as though it was somehow my father who initiated this meeting. Nina started to teach me a bit, not too much, I am still cautious, of the New Testament. I didn't feel much resistance, it surprised me, but I also didn't feel the same pleasure I normally feel when I read the Torah. As long as it is not philosophy, I think that it will probably be ok.

Fiction by Orian Assayag

Comment on the text by Orian Assayag:

What was important for me in the story:

This story is fiction and did not happen in reality. However, the characters in the story are based on people living around me. I wanted to respect the gap between those worlds, the Catholic, and the Jewish world. I wanted to see if we could get closer through our traditions and through the hostility, anxiety, and traumas and still have the voice of my pious father in the background, asking "where those dialogs are leading my daughter? Will she end up lost in someone else's tradition?".

Short biography Orian Assayag:

Born in 1992 in Rehovoth. Mother grew up in North Africa Father in France. Studied Jewish history at the Hebrew University for BA. In 2017 studied for one semester at the Catholic University of Leuven. In September 2020 graduated with an MA in religious studies from Copenhagen University.