

The Dialogue with the Dalai Lama

BY JOY LEVITT

There is something a little unnerving about reading about yourself in someone else's book. Did I really say those things? Was it really the way the author describes? Despite my discomfort, I devoured Rodger Kamenetz's *The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet's Rediscovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), staying up all night to finish it in one reading.

The book provides a fascinating inside-look at an extraordinary experience between a small group of Jews and the Dalai Lama. For me, one of the fortunate people to be part of that group, the book has been a spiritual gift, a profound reminder of a time when all my assumptions were blown open, all my insecurities laid bare, and the deepest of my values confirmed.

When the call came with the invitation to join the delegation to the Dalai Lama's temporary residence in India, I thought it was a phoney phone call. "Would you like to travel to northern India at the invitation of the Dalai Lama? His Holiness is interested in learning about Judaism and especially about how the Jews have

survived so long in exile. We are looking for eight Jewish leaders—rabbis and scholars—who would be willing to both teach and learn, to enter into dialogue with the Tibetans."

I spent the better part of that initial conversation trying to convince the organizer, Marc Lieberman, that I was not the right person for this trip. I gave him the names of several other rabbis who had studied Eastern religions, and whose temperament and intellect were better suited for a profound engagement with Buddhism. Not for one minute did I have any intention of saying yes. I had a full-time job and two small children. There was no reason to do this.

I decided to speak with Yitz and Blu Greenberg, Orthodox Jewish leaders who had recommended that Marc call me, to find out why they had agreed to go. Blu was direct. "Well, of course, it's an adventure. But mainly I'm going because the Dalai Lama has been one of the very few major religious leaders who has spoken out positively about the Jewish State and its right to exist. I feel it is important for the Dalai Lama to meet

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Jews and to feel our empathy for the plight of his exiled people. Yitz really believes that we have something to offer the Tibetans, that our experience in exile can be useful to their survival in diaspora.”

These were compelling reasons to go. They were about politics and reaching out to one in need. I decided to go, pushing aside my substantial concerns about travel in India and my ignorance about the culture and religion of Tibetan Buddhism. Although Marc had emphasized that this was to be a dialogue, I had little expectation of learning too much or in any way changing as a result of the encounter. I was a teacher, a representative of Judaism, offering the benefit of our historical experience. It would be, as Blu said, an adventure.

What I remember most about the experience, years later, was my strong sense of loneliness. Not for twenty years or more had virtually all my relationships been unavailable to me. Thousands and thousands of geographic and spiritual miles from my family and congregation, I seemed to stop being a wife, a mother, even a rabbi. After twenty hours of flying from New York to New Delhi, followed by a hair-raising fifteen hour drive, some of which traversed through the war-torn Punjab, I felt stripped of all my identities. About halfway up to Dharamsala, travelling along seemingly non-existent roads amidst burning cars and rioting students, I realized, perhaps for the first time in my life, that I wasn't in control of anything at all. I remember

thinking as we passed through checkpoint after checkpoint that it was possible I wouldn't live through this. Why had I agreed to take this journey? Did I really believe I had something to say to the leader of Tibetan Buddhism, a religion about which I knew virtually nothing? Did I think even for a moment His Holiness had something to teach me?

Letting Go

Letting go of the need to answer that and many more questions was one of the hardest and most liberating processes I had to undergo in order to make this trip more than just something I had done. The details that formed the shape of my life in New York—arrangements, schedules, phone calls—and the inherent sense of safety and security that such obsession with control and organization brings had to be abandoned. We would arrive when we arrived. We would teach what we could and learn what we could be open to learning. It would be whatever we made of it.

Before we were to meet with His Holiness, the lamas, and other Tibetan monks and nuns, we had to meet one another, in prayer, over meals, in study, and in the endless planning meetings where we decided how to approach a given issue in our encounter with the Buddhists. The group's diversity—a great advantage to the Buddhists—was a tremendous challenge for those of us who were task-oriented. The simplest issues, such as who would lead morning services, became difficult, as issues of

egalitarianism and Orthodoxy collided in ways that I had long since resolved. But here in Dharamsala, we were eight men and three women—one more than necessary for me and two less than required for Yitz Greenberg. The fact that the two organizers of the trip, Buddhist men of Jewish origin, could save the day reminded me that you could go literally to the ends of the earth and still not resolve the thorny issues confronting Jewish unity at the end of this century.

Travelling in caravan to Dharamsala, we had agreed to meet at a small restaurant in Karnal. One car was late, and we were eating when it finally pulled up. I had assumed that they had had car trouble (it seemed that every Indian on the road had car trouble). Actually, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, one of the members of the group, had spotted a Sikh Temple on the side of the road and he convinced the driver to stop so he could meet the Sikh Priest and daven *ma'ariv* in the Temple. The encounter clearly energized Zalman, who somehow managed to connect with the Sikh religious leader, despite language and religious barriers. I could feel a split in the group taking form—those who were eager to hear more about Zalman's experience and those who were uncomfortable with what Zalman had done. Kamenetz writes that he was "electrified by his joyous crossing of boundaries, his davening chutzpah. It broke through all my neat categories....I was conscious of the theatricality of the gesture, but that didn't diminish the effect. This was my fan-

tasy of what Jewish renewal might look like." It didn't look like Jewish renewal to me. At the time of our dinner in Karnal, as I watched the twinkle in Zalman's eyes as he described his conversation and prayer with the Sikh Priest, my anxiety increased. Now I was not only worried about my physical safety but also my spiritual security.

Dialogue Works Both Ways

There would be more such boundary crossings as we planned our time together with the monks and lamas and finally with the Dalai Lama, each of which Kamenetz recounts with accuracy and sensitivity. Each episode challenged us, both as individuals and as a group, whether it was trying to decide if it was appropriate for Jews to refer to the Dalai Lama by his accepted title of His Holiness, or whether we should, as protocol suggested, bow slightly upon greeting the Dalai Lama.

The result of the dialogue, even with its boundary crossings (on both sides, I might add), was to reconfirm our deep appreciation for the tradition we carry. This appreciation was first manifest for me when we recited the grace after meals following a Shabbat dinner. The Tibetans became very moved upon learning that Jews pray for the rebuilding of Jerusalem after meals in their homes. They immediately made plans to see if they might write a Tibetan prayer articulating their yearning for Lhasa. I was stunned by the new light suddenly cast on this very familiar prayer. I have

recited grace after meals on Shabbat my entire life, and yet had never really grasped its role in preserving the Zionist dream in the hearts and minds of Jews throughout the generations. Since my return from India, I have never recited those words without thinking both of the Tibetans and of my deep longing for Zion at peace.

Our main purpose in travelling to Dharamsala was to teach the tools of Jewish survival, which each of us did in turn, choosing from a variety of different subjects, from pluralism to the Jewish Family to Kabbalah to the institution of the synagogue. For an hour at a time, the Dalai Lama listened with an intensity that comes from several hours of meditation each day. More than any other single attribute (including his charming sense of humor, his remarkable humility, and his simple acts of kindness), it was his manner of listening that overwhelmed me. The Jewish art of dialogue, at least as I have understood it, involves thinking of what you're going to say when the other person finishes talking, which he rarely gets to do, because usually you interrupt him. I had never experienced the kind of deep listening that the Tibetans practice, and I noticed that it changed the way we spoke. I found myself wanting to say exactly what I meant, speaking more carefully because I knew that each word would be heard and appreciated. It was an amazing lesson to learn, though hard to implement back home without the meditation skills (and community support) that such listening requires.

We had also been challenged to look critically at Judaism through both the eyes of the Tibetans and those of the Jews who had found their home within the Tibetan Buddhist community. In our encounters with Buddhists of Jewish origin as well as with JUBUS (those who straddle both worlds, or try to), it was difficult to ignore the dimension of spiritual deficiency they experienced in Jewish life. It was not always clear why some of us had found fulfillment in Jewish life, while for others it was totally absent. But it was clear that in many cases access to Jewish tradition and its richness had been (and continues to be) severely impeded by narrow-minded, inadequate, and superficial education. While none of us had to travel thousands of miles from home to learn this, it was nevertheless a painful truth to hear from the Buddhists.

Unpacking the Tradition

I had chosen to speak about the synagogue as a response to diaspora fragmentation. I was aware that the Tibetan Buddhists had no such similar institution of communal prayer and study, and felt it important for them to understand this primary diaspora center, which had developed largely as a response to Jewish exile. As I began to talk, presenting the Dalai Lama with a book the children of our synagogue had prepared for him describing our synagogue, it felt as if I were hearing this all for the first time. Listening to myself through the Tibetans' ears, realizing how remarkable the synagogue has been (and

could be) in the life of the Jews, I felt a deep sense of privilege to be part of the Jewish people. I became energized about my rabbinate, eager to get home and reexamine what we did in the synagogue through the new lens of the Tibetans.

I believe that the Dalai Lama found each of our talks useful and interesting. For me, they were transforming. Though we didn't even scratch the surface of Jewish history, tradition, culture, or practice, we had begun to unpack some of the essence that formed the substance of our survival. In so doing, we had helped another community and felt a deep sense of awe at our own tradition and its richness.

Nowhere was this more obvious to me than in our last hour in India, which we spent at the synagogue in

New Delhi. I entered the synagogue with some trepidation. I was exhausted from the trip south and thoroughly shaken from the overwhelming poverty in Dehli. No theology exists to adequately explain my good fortune in life, as it compared to the horrendous way these people lived. The last thing I wanted to do was go to *shul*. But almost from the moment we walked into the building, we were embraced by the community's leader and began to daven. I closed my eyes and entered my history, the words of my ancestors, my words, my prayers. I felt connected, comforted, perhaps even a little less lonely. We sang every Jewish song, danced every Jewish dance. And we recited a collective *shehehyanu*, acknowledging our gratitude for our lives and the tradition that ennoble us. ♦