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Levy, Rivka

The Secret-Diary-of-a-Jewish Housewife: VOLUME 1: THE MOVE TO THE GOLDEN CITY / Rivka Levy – First edition

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*For R, M and T, who know all my secrets.*

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# The Secret Diary of a Jewish Housewife

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#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

## Introduction

*The Secret Diary of a Jewish Housewife* contains my secret musings on one of the craziest years of my life.

I wrote it for all the women out there who are also sometimes sick of all the meals we have to make; or exhausted by all the love and empathy we have to provide for our husbands, kids and friends. Read this and be reassured that you aren't the only woman worrying about piling on the pounds, or panicking about whether you're actually even getting *somewhere* in life; (and when that last one hits, only chocolate can really heal the pain.)

This diary starts in January 2015, a few months after me and my family moved to the golden city of Jerusalem and opened up a tourist attraction called 'The Meaning of Life' in the Old City's Jewish Quarter.

Dear reader, the whole thing was a complete nightmare from start to finish!

We arrived in Jerusalem just in time to experience a huge wave of Arab riots, which quickly turned into another of Israel's mini-wars a few days' later, when Operation Protective Edge began to try to stop the hundreds of missiles being fired into Israel from terrorists in the Gaza Strip.

Within a couple of days' of the unrest starting, Jerusalem went from being considered one of the most dangerous places in the country (because of the riots) to one of the safest again (because very few rockets were reaching this far...) But our tourist attraction still died a slow, lingering death.

Four months after we opened the doors, we'd still only managed to sell just seven tickets, and our business was officially a bust. So in November 2014, my husband and I finally pulled the plug on that part of our Jerusalem dream, and 'The Meaning of Life' closed down.

Now, came the really hard part: we had to dig deep, and try to figure out what the meaning of *our* life was going to continue to be, now that we'd lost our business, our savings, and our reassurance that things would somehow always work out OK.

(Let me spoil the cliff-hanger ending here by telling you it DID all work out fine, kind of, in the end...)

This diary is a chronicle of one of the craziest years of my life, a testament to the power of prayer, and a glimpse inside the world of a Jewish housewife who was trying (and usually failing...) to stay sane in a mad world.



## JANUARY 2015

### The identity crisis

For the last nine and a half years, I've been trying my hardest to be an ISRAELI. I've been hampered in my quest to be an ISRAELI by a couple of major drawbacks: it took me three years before I even had a chance of understanding what my kids' teachers were telling me at the PTA (Even now, I mostly just smile and nod...)

And secondly (and this one I've only just realised) - I'm actually *not* an Israeli.

How can I be? My formative years were spent in London and Canada, and until I was 16 we weren't doing anything very 'Jewish' at home. I went to a non-Jewish school, and I obsessed over all the things my non-Jewish friends obsessed over: George Michael, clothes and Back to the Future.

It's not very spiritual, is it? It's not very Jewish. It's not very ISRAELI.

And for the first twenty years of my life, that's what I had hard-wired into to my soul: British non-Jewish culture, with all its sarcastic humour, beer and obsession with pies.

I'd taken a lot of the more obvious rough edges off in London, before I made aliyah. We were keeping kosher, keeping Shabbat, learning Torah, hanging out with Jews.

So in my head, I thought I'd step off the plane at Ben Gurion, pick up Hebrew in two weeks, and then have a bunch of cool sabra friends called Ilanit and Roni to hang out with.

But that's not exactly what happened.

We landed in a very 'Anglo' neighbourhood, and quickly outgrew it. I wanted real Israel; I didn't move to Israel just for my kids to feel like expat Brits. So we moved to an ISRAELI settlement across the Green Line, and I tried my darndest to fit in.

Three years' later, my kids spoke Hebrew really nicely, and their friends were all Israeli, which I thought was so cool, until they started beating my children up on the way to school.

I don't know how a real ISRAELI would have reacted, but I reacted by getting the heck out of there, and moving to a place that was a bit more *civilised* (read: socially repressed) and Anglo.

For the first year, it was heaven. Then all the things that I don't like very much about Anglo culture resurfaced, like the competition to be seen as a 'success'; and the cliqueness; and the obsession with big houses and nice holidays.

This was in my super-duper-trying-to-be-frum-like-people-in-Meah-Shearim period, when I felt bad about doing anything more gashmius than buying a chicken leg for Shabbos.

A whole bunch of things happened over the next three years, and to cut a long story short, we ended up in Jerusalem, very close to Meah Shearim, six short (but very long...) months ago.

Moving to Jerusalem sparked off a whole big identity crisis for me. I realised that I actually didn't want to be chareidi; I realised that I actually didn't want to be poor; I realised that making a good kugel was just not spiritually satisfying, however hard I tried.

And the last thing I realised, in the middle of the Shlomo Katz Chanuka concert I went to last week, is that I actually don't want to be ISRAELI anymore. It's not that any of these things are intrinsically bad, God forbid. They're just not *me*.

After that particular penny dropped, I paid my first visit to the Jerusalem Gap Store for about three years, and I picked up a new coat with fake fur on the hood. It looks so 'Anglo-in-Israel' - and I love it.

I don't know what all this means. What I can tell you is that as I'm reclaiming all these parts of myself that I've been embarrassed or ashamed of, I'm feeling so much happier and settled and healthy.

No more beating myself up for liking beans on toast. No more disdaining myself for actually really liking that nice grey jumper in Zara. No more feeling like a worm, because I'm enjoying listening to music in English for a change (by the Maccabeats...)

I know it was all well-meaning, and spiritually-striving of me to try to be a holy Meah Shearim-type balabusta, but the big drawback was that it's not *me*. I nearly killed myself trying to fit into those boxes, but God has been showing me time and again that I have a different way of trying to build the world, and to get closer to Him, and it entails going through Gap on the way to the Kotel.

What can I do? I know God wants me to serve Him happily, as me. And now that I've got my fake fur trim coat I feel I've taken a giant step towards giving Him what He really wants from me: to be me, even with all my imperfections.

**The secret of shemitta year**

Sometimes, we experience a time of such prolonged, intense darkness in our lives, that it's called 'The secret of shemitta year'. Before Big Agro came on the scene, keeping shemitta meant letting the land lie fallow for a year, which could mean you'd have no food to eat for a whole 12 months.

Food = parnassa = sustenance = livelihood = the means, the wherewithal to stay alive, to live.

In our times, this sort of potential destitution and economic vulnerability can still happen, but with a modern twist: the bank can foreclose on your house; your job (or business) can disappear overnight; everything you try to do can fail, often inexplicably. After this has carried on for a while, you hit rock bottom, and you start to wonder how you are ever going to make ends meet enough to continue to live, to be.

All your financial security, all your assets, all your confidence in your ability to make a living, evaporates. It's a massive test.

Our rabbis explain that the only way you can pass these sorts of test in one piece is to work really hard on your emuna, and in particular, on your emuna that *Ein Od Milvado* - God is really all there is.

If you can hang on to your faith in the middle of this test - and believe me, it's really not easy - then, our rabbis tells us, you'll see that God Himself is sustaining you, and that He always was, even when you thought it was your great degree, or your amazing real estate acumen, or your fantastic job that was doing it all.

If you can hang on - and again that can be a very big 'if' - then you'll achieve a massive *tikkun*, or soul correction, that will fix a whole bunch of very deep, hard-to-reach things in your soul.

And these tests don't last forever.

When I first read these teachings of our rabbis about the secret of the shemitta year, I almost cried from relief. You see, everything my husband and I have tried for the last two years financially, professionally, socially, religiously - you name it - flopped so badly it went past 'embarrassing' a long time ago.

It got so bad at one point that I started watching the local bag ladies to pick up tips for when I'd have to pack up and move again - to the nearest dumpster.

Until a month ago, I truly couldn't see how we were ever going to turn things around, or how we were going to be able to 'live' in any sense of the word, once the money we got from selling our house ran out.

Then I went to Uman.

I learnt a lot of lessons there, I got a lot of breakthroughs, and one of the biggest presents I came home with was hope, and the feeling that maybe, just maybe, we will be successful again, we will earn money again, we will own a home again, it will be good again.

I know shemitta year is only two months' old for most people (if it's even on their radar), but I feel my own personal shemitta ended in Uman last month. And now, I'm waiting for the good times to roll again, whenever God's ready to send them down.

### **Words to live by - A woman's sense of purpose**

The other day, I was thinking about what my purpose in life, as a Jewish woman, really is. Is it really to help my husband pay our mortgage, and to try and fit my parenting and spiritual growth in around my full-time office job? Or is there something deeper going on here?

After some pondering, and some checking through Jewish sources, it jumped out at me loud and clear that I'm not going to achieve any lasting sense of purpose by trying to be a copy-cat man.

A man's spiritual role in the world is very different from a woman's spiritual role. So much of our suffering and difficulties stem from the fact that people just don't know this stuff anymore, and have bought into the secular viewpoint that the whole purpose of life for everyone is just to make as much money as possible.

But that's not the Jewish way. So what is? What can really give us Jewish women a lasting sense of purpose, if it's not all the college degrees we have hanging on our walls, and all the money we're making with our big, fat careers?

Each person can decide that for themselves. But in the meantime, I put together the following 'words to live by', based on our Jewish sources, to help you (and me...) along the path to clarity.

**My husband signed the ketuba not me.**

The Arizal taught that the main soul correction we're all here to do is to learn emuna.

Men learn emuna (and correct their souls) via making parnassa; women learn emuna (and correct their souls) via their families.

**Commented [R1]:** This should be circled, Raphael

When I try to do my husband's job, two things happen: I prevent him from learning emuna and turning to God; and I prevent myself from achieving my own soul correction, because I'm off trying to be a man, instead of being a mother and a woman.

When there are financial issues, they are ONLY coming to teach the man emuna and to get him to make teshuva. (This sounds controversial, but it's all based on Torah.)

The Gemara tells us: honour your wives and become rich. This is a big clue about what a lot of men might need to make teshuva about. Other things that can cause men big 'money' issues include a lack of modesty (including ogling other women on the internet) spilling seed deliberately, anger problems; and, of course, lack of emuna. 'Lack of emuna' is when people refuse to see God behind their financial issues, and instead blame other people for their money problems. For example, many husbands often fall into the trap of blaming their money issues on their wives for not working, or for not working enough.

The reason this doesn't work is because spiritually, women are the pipe of abundance for the home, including for finances. If we're miserable - even if we're working three jobs - our finances will be lousy. If we're happy - even if we aren't working at all - our finances will be blessed, even if there isn't a lot of money.

(This is a good time to note that 'work' is not the same as 'purpose', and for women, they can often be diametrically opposed.)

Of course, it's not 'forbidden' for a woman to work, and it's not even a bad thing, but only under the following circumstances:

- She has to enjoy it enough to do it for free.
- It doesn't come ahead of her children, or at least, not on a regular basis (the odd deadline, the odd 'big' push is fine, but not as a regular way of life.)
- She has to WANT to be doing it, and not just doing it because her husband refuses to learn some emuna.

### **The waiting game**

For months' now, I've been getting some version of the same message in my chats with God: "Hang on. You're nearly there. It's all going to turnaround soon, and be better than it's ever been."

I've been struggling with so many issues on so many fronts, that I'm really, really desperate to believe that it's all going to improve soon.

But then I hit a day like today, and it's like all my spiritual reserves have disappeared.

I've been having disturbing dreams the last few days, and they all have the same sort of theme: I'm homeless, I'm lost; me and my life are full of 'holes' that can't seem to be filled, I'm a stranger, an outsider, etc.

I wake up after these dreams completely drained, and then I go through the day with huge anxiety.

Dear reader, I talk to God a lot, and that's really what's been keeping me going. I *know* I'm struggling at the moment, despite all my praying and other stuff, because objectively, I have huge challenges going on in my life that I appear to be powerless to change or fix.

Whatever practical effort, or *hishtadlut*, me and my husband has tried the last two years has failed spectacularly.

There is nothing else to do except pray, and wait for God to turn things around.

Nervous breakdowns notwithstanding, I thought I was doing OK with having no income, no stability, no community, and some other excruciating tests of emuna that I can't even begin to talk about.

But my dreams are showing me otherwise.

Last night's dream was a classic: an old 'successful' friend was driving me in their car to stay with some other hugely successful people, in their enormous flat, because I was homeless and penniless.

The whole drive, I kept seeing things with holes in them - massive holes in the ground, holes in the furniture, holes in the buildings.

It sounds fairly tame as nightmares go, but I woke up feeling so despairing today, that I had to talk to God for a whole hour just to be able to get out of bed.

I feel like I've spent the best part of a decade waiting for God to rescue me from the darkness, but recently, at least in my life, it's just intensified.

What's a person to do, when they've been to Uman seven times, talked to God for hours, got blessings and advice from holy people, tried to make teshuva on everything they can think of, and still they're stuck, spiritually?

Answers on a postcard, please.

And in the meantime, I'll continue to play the waiting game.

**School time**

We moved to Jerusalem on July 1, 2014, the day before the Israeli Government began 'Operation Protective Edge' to try to prevent the Arabs in Gaza rocketing the country every five minutes with GRAD missiles (the more sophisticated cousins of SCUDs, replete with their own GPS).

The local Arabs started rioting all around us, and I kind of felt like I'd landed in some crazy 'Nam movie, or something, between the police sirens, the rocket sirens and 'breaking news' alerts every five minutes. It was a very intense introduction to life in Jerusalem. Thankfully, that mini-war ended before Rosh Hashanah, and things seemed to calm down a little.

For about a month.

My kids now go to school in the Old City of Jerusalem. Yes, *that* Old City, where people are now getting stabbed with screwdrivers, knives, bits of rusty fencing - whatever the Arabs have to hand, basically.

Usually, someone tells me a particularly 'juicy' stabbing story five minutes after my kids were just in the same location, or are planning to go there tomorrow. My kids' friends live in the Muslim Quarter of the Old City, or in Ir David (right next to Silwan Village) or in Maalei Zeitim - a small Jewish village right next to the Mount of Olives that has its own machine-gun outpost.

This is all super-cool stuff - when it's not your kids that are going to visit these places.

But when it's your kids, what else can you do besides making sure you say Tikkun Haklali pretty much every single day, and shoving a bunch of coins in the charity box for them every time they step out the door?

Apart from one kid who lives in Har Homa, and another kid who lives in Givat Mordechai, pretty much every single one of my kids' classmates comes to school under armed guard - what's called '*levuyi*', in Hebrew.

Sometimes, when God gives me a rare moment to catch my breath, I think about the enormous bizarreness of so much of my life right now, and it almost makes me laugh: I mean, Arabs scare the pants off me! Almost as much as having to wear a tichel...

So the fact that my kids now get to school by walking through the Arab shuk in the Old City, and that all their social engagements involve being escorted by two big ex-soldier guys with guns is still something I often can't believe.

It's a constant, daily reminder that God is running the world, not me.

I'm working really hard to hand the control panel back to God at the moment, and to do my best to be happy about my present circumstances. That's the true definition of emuna: being happy with your lot.

But it's definitely easier when your kids are going to some quiet village prep school with excellent academic standards, you own your own house, your husband has a steady job, and you have maybe half a clue about what you think you're doing in life and what it's all about.

The Old City is such a holy, crazy place to be intimately involved with. On the one hand, I'm thrilled my kids are there in school, and on the other hand, I sometimes wish they were anywhere else in the country.

But then, my daughter told me an Arab stabbed some people on a bus in 'safe' Tel Aviv this morning (she has all the latest 'Arab stabbing' news, often even before Ynet), and I realised that God really is in charge.

We need to do what we need to do, and trust in God's goodness, and then let go.

We're really not in control.

Of all the lessons I've learnt from my children's school, that's probably the most important.