BAKING FROM SCRATCH
by
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It's a hot, hazy day in Camden, New Jersey. I am seven. Bubbie, Mommie and I are supposed to be napping, but I have crept downstairs to bake a cake. I have watched Mommie, it looked easy! I gather together flour, milk, eggs, and sugar, mix them quickly, pour them into a pan and set it in the oven. Half an hour later I take out the pan. The cake is all runny! I pour it down the drain and crawl back into my bed.

I am married, with teen-age children. I am waiting for something to happen. I do yoga, read Carl Jung, and study books on Kabbalah. I want to experience God. One writer warns against going in without preparation and advises the aspiring mystic to seek the support and underpinning of organized religion. But none of the rabbis I've met want to talk about, or seem to even know about Kabbalah, and I'm not an observant Jew. Besides, although I am even older than the prescribed age, 40, I am not the prescribed sex. It seems better to go it alone, as I do the yoga. The yoga books say that "powers" will develop as a result of practice, but they are only a distraction from the real goal, which is union with God. That's what I want, whether from yoga or Kabbalah, or both. I read the Zohar, I continue the yoga, nothing happens, or rather, life happens while I'm waiting. My son is diabetic, my daughter rebels, my brother dies, my husband is having problems in his department.

I go to a lecture by a New Age rabbi. Suddenly I'm awake. Here is someone who incorporates all I have been seeking. In his big fur Hassidic hat and black coat he looks like a vigorous twinkly sage from the eighteenth century. His caressing voice mixes Yiddishisms with modern-day computerese jargon. He sings neguddim in soft tender tones, and his followers include women, gays and lesbians, as well as aspiring rabbis. His warmth, brilliant insights, esoteric knowledge, and clever means of expression affect me powerfully. I become a follower, go to lectures and retreats and to his House of Study.

Then I learn that the Hassidic garb is only one costume. The Rabbi is just as likely to wear overalls as a three-piece suit, depending on the occasion. That flagrant streak of showmanship enchants and raises doubts in me at the same time. He is wonderfully caring toward his young wife and their baby daughter, but she is his third wife, and he has grown children as well. I find I am judgmental, and besides, do not have the chutzpah nor commitment to ask him to be my teacher. I've found nostalgia and excitement but I haven't found God, and my husband and I are not getting along. I drop out.

I have a dream. In an exaggerated flurry of trumpets and out of supercilious clouds, my dead father appears. I know he is going to tell me something of great significance and I wait eagerly for his words. At last he speaks. His words are "Never bake a cake from scratch."

A joke? There is, actually, a somewhat funny, pompous quality about the scene. Still, I want to know what it means! Is he saying not to bake a cake that comes from the devil? Perhaps he means that I should hold on to organized religion, not try to reinvent the wheel. I remember what happened when I once tried to bake a cake from scratch. I had to pour it down the drain.
Of course, now I realized that at age seven I had not had the general know-how for baking cakes. I had not measured the flour, added baking powder, preset the oven, or stirred the cake long enough. If my father was advising me not to bake a cake from scratch, would that mean that religiously he felt I was still a child?

Not wanting to deal with these questions, I decided to take the dream literally. I stopped baking from scratch and used Duncan Hines or Betty Crocker mixes exclusively, until the children left home and my husband died and I stopped baking altogether.

I took up dreams, and started a group to discuss and analyze dreams. In many of them I was trying to go back to the house in New Jersey where I lived as a child. In one dream I did manage to get there. I was delighted to find that the original two-story house now had a third story! And a new kitchen. Was it a sign that I will be “going up in the world” (not too far, I hope) or does it mean that I am now better equipped and should try again? I have learned a few things over the years since that dream, mainly from decoding cryptograms, like this one: “The answers are not what is important; it is the questions that are.”

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