
Reviewed by Merle Carrus, Hollis, NH, USA

So many of my American friends have said that when their plane landed in Israel and they stepped off into the Holy Land for the first time they would kiss the ground. They found the experience extremely moving. Since the end of World War II, the Jewish people, and the Land of Israel have had a special relationship that seems different than citizens of any other country have with a physical place. Furthermore, the Jewish person is connected to Israel not only by nationality but also by religion.

Beth Kissileff explores the concept of *baalei teshuvah*, Jews who are discovering a tradition once lost to them, in her new novel, *Questioning Return*. The story of the intense pull both the State of Israel and the Jewish religion can have on a person. The protagonist in this novel, Wendy Goldberg, is a Princeton University graduate student writing her dissertation. Her plan is to interview American Jews who have come to connect more intensely to the Jewish religion. They are captivated by the ultra Orthodox Judaism that has never been apart of their lives before. Wendy plans to question their motivations and write her thesis on the road to her academic and career success.

We watch as Wendy lands in Israel and finds her way around Jerusalem. She is meeting people, learning how to speak Hebrew at Ulpan, using her new knowledge of the language as she buys groceries and handles day-to-day life. As Wendy becomes immersed in the lifestyle the plot develops, the novel becomes more of a personal exploration. Wendy finds herself alone in Israel, learning about herself as she questions others. Her own introspection becomes part of the storyline. Wendy explains to others that her impetus for writing her dissertation about *baalei teshuvah* is because of never understanding her friend's sister who became religious, but as the book moves along we see that it may be Wendy working out her own questions of where she fits into the Jewish religion. As she meets potential friends in Jerusalem, she explains her story to them, "I've always wondered how people can change? This is my chance to find out. I have this friend Nina whose sister Debbie, now Devorah, became religious. Debbie was always worried
about her looks and what people would think of her. When she became religious, she was still the same, except now she worries about how her sheitel looks and if her sleeves are long enough."

Wendy has questions about her own place within Judaism and about her career. She is concerned with being in control of her destiny. She is questioning the ability of a person who makes radical changes to their lives, and wondering if they can still retain the core beliefs and personality of who they really are. Control is an underlying theme throughout the book. Wendy is always vigilant to make sure she does not give up her goals of academic success and thoughts of a career when she gets involved in a relationship. She is always questioning whether she can have love and a career at the same time. While she is anxious to be successful with her dissertation, looking for love and marriage is very much on her mind.

Meeting Uri, a religious student of psychology, at a party and starting a romantic relationship takes Wendy through self-examination. Could she give up something of herself to fit in another person? Can she compromise on religious practice and maybe stay in Israel for another person? Wendy and Uri explore their friendship, she wonders, can she safely soften her expectations and protective shell, "It's tough...I prefer being analytical observer to emotional and vulnerable participant. I want my dissertation to be like that - precise, rigorous, carefully etched, solid, but with reticulations of nerves and emotions running through, to keep it from being completely hard.” As she is speaking, the reader may be wondering if she is just describing her thesis paper or really her own personal feelings of protection, afraid to get too close to another person or religious belief for fear of losing herself.

In an interview with baalei teshuvah, Wendy receives some very good advice including the thought that life is not an all or nothing proposition, "some people ...can't allow themselves the slightest chink in the armor of their faith, because they think it will make the entire suit crumble."

As Wendy interviews her subjects she gets some great advice for herself; though some people are afraid of weakness, we can all take heed from the interviewee Rachel’s words, "To get to certainty or understanding, you need questioning and not knowing. If you don't bring up those doubts, you can't proceed beyond them."
Throughout the book, there are beautiful descriptions of Israel. Kissileff takes the reader on a tour of Jerusalem as she describes in detail the streets of the city, Machane Yehuda Market, the Old City and the cobblestone streets of the German Colony. As her characters walk through the city, you feel you are right there encountering the tastes, smells and sounds of the market and city with them. Jerusalem plays almost as important role in shaping each of the characters as the people they interact with. Could there really be something different about Israel that draws people to it?

Life is all about balance. You need to be able to feel confident in who you are, so that you can accept others. You need to create a balance in life, to welcome in different ideas and beliefs, to enjoy the religious life with the secular. Be careful not to cut yourself off from experiences out of fear, but to embrace every opportunity that comes along and enjoy it in the moment. Start with reading about Wendy and her tribulations and triumphs.