

A Day in the Life of Two Jewish Women

It is Saturday morning, about 9:30. The streets of the Upper West Side of Manhattan are empty, except for a few hardy joggers puffing along with their Walkmen. As Stephanie,¹ a thirty-two-year-old advertising executive, approaches her destination, the large, modern, white-stone synagogue at the corner of West 69th Street, she begins to notice the dressed-up people converging on the streets, all seemingly heading to Shabbat² (Sabbath) services. She draws her breath and follows them into the synagogue.

Inside the building, in the red and black carpeted lobby, people are milling about. The women are fashionably dressed and bejeweled, and several are wearing stylish hats. Little children run around, comfortable in the shul (synagogue). Some of the men wear long white shawls, with black stripes and fringes at the ends, over their suits.

Stephanie hesitates. The people in the lobby appear so at ease, whereas she feels awkward and conscious of not having been in a synagogue for years. Recently, Stephanie and her boyfriend of three years had split up, and she had been going through a rough time at work. She had mentioned to a friend, an Orthodox woman, that she was looking to do something new and exciting, something that would be intellectually as well as socially stimulating. As the two of them had recently been talking about Judaism, her friend suggested that she go to the Beginners' Service at Lincoln Square—a lively, fascinating service led by a dynamic rabbi and attended by many young, attractive people. Stephanie decided to give it a try, and today is the day.

She glances around, trying to get a feel for the place. On her left, through a pair of glass-paned doors, she sees an unusual sanctuary. It is built in the round, with women and men seated on

wooden benches in separate semicircular sections leading upward toward stained glass windows. The men also occupy the floor space in the center of the circle, and the men's and women's sections are divided by six-foot-high plexiglass. Stephanie decides that this room looks too formal to fit her friend's description of the Beginners' Service. A man in a white shawl notices her bewildered look and asks if she's new here. She nods. He says, "Don't worry; we all began sometime" and directs her upstairs to "Effie's minyan (prayer service)." First hurdle overcome, Stephanie heads up the concrete flight of stairs.

At the top of the stairs she steps into a long corridor where she is confronted with a confusing array of sounds, people, and doors. Through a doorway across the hall and slightly off to the left of the stairs, she hears singing. She glances through that open door and sees the women's section. The people in the room all seem perfectly able to follow the Hebrew service, so she heads down the corridor to a small classroom with a waist-high wooden divider down the middle. Men are seated on the left, women are on the right, and a rabbi is standing up front in the middle explaining the service. Stephanie realizes this must be the Beginners' Service, but she hesitates to enter because getting to the women's section requires walking around the rabbi as he leads the prayers. She asks a woman standing next to her in the hall if there's another entrance to the room. The woman replies, "Oh, that's okay. You can just go right in." She shows Stephanie how to fold her coat on top of an already jam-packed coatrack and says with a smile, "This is the hardest part; after this it's simple." Once Stephanie has placed her coat on the rack, she draws a breath and walks in.

As she enters, she passes a poster on the door that says:

Welcome to this service for people with little or no background. Take a Bible (blue book) and a siddur (black book) [prayer book] and find a seat and prayer shawl (men). Remember, other people in here didn't know what they were doing when they first came but they learned quickly, and you can learn too. . . . Please follow along.

When she walks past the rabbi, he nods quickly at her and points with his chin to the women's section. She doesn't immediately see the books she's supposed to pick up, so rather than stand-

ing in the front looking, she takes a seat. While he continues to lead the prayers, the rabbi walks over to her and hands her the two thick books as well as a handout welcoming newcomers to the service and explaining a little about it.

She relaxes a bit and looks around the room. The service is already in progress, and the room, which holds about seventy people, is half full. The somewhat larger women's section has about forty seats. All the people in the service look professional: they are well groomed, nicely clothed, and fashionably coiffed. Most are young, in their mid-twenties to late thirties, although there are also some middle-aged and elderly people in the room. She notes that although most of the participants "look Jewish," a Chinese woman and a black man are seated in the room and are easily following the service.

In the front of the room hang several handwritten cardboard posters explaining the service. In the center is a large poster announcing:

If you do not *yet* read Hebrew, you may sign up for the free crash course in Hebrew reading; you only need to call the synagogue office to make arrangements. Meanwhile, just try to follow along and get into the rhythm of the prayers and chanting.

Reading this sign, Stephanie thinks, "Crash course in Hebrew? It's nice that they offer it, but who's got the time?"

The other posters—in transliterated Hebrew and in English—describe aspects of the service. One displays the order of the prayer service:

Berchot Hashachar (morning blessings)

Pesukei Dezimrah (Psalms of Praise)

Shema (Hear, O Israel) and its blessings

Amidah (silent devotion)

Torah (Pentateuch) reading

Return of the Torah

Mussaf (additional *Amidah*)

Aleinu (It is our duty)

Adon Olam (Lord of the Universe)

As Stephanie struggles to pronounce these words, she suddenly realizes that “Torah” is the only one she recognizes. She wonders how it is that she went to Reform Sunday School for eight years, and even was confirmed, and yet never heard of most of these words.

Another poster, this one extending over two sheets of oak tag, lists the three *brachot* (blessings) that precede the *Shema* and the three blessings within it. A small sign nearby says, “Have you greeted the person next to you? Shabbat shalom.” “Well,” she thinks, “at least I understand that one.”

Glancing around the room, Stephanie notices additional signs on the left wall, mostly about Hebrew. A large printed poster demonstrates the vowels of the Hebrew language and the pronunciation of the sounds. Numerous sheets of paper contain each of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and their English equivalents. Stephanie begins to realize how central Hebrew is here; she wonders if she can catch up and whether it is even worth trying.

Stephanie also looks at the handout, which explains that the service is for those with little or no background and is intended to teach newcomers the structure of the Sabbath prayer services and provide a forum for learning about traditional Jewish life. The handout instructs newcomers to follow, sing along, and relax: “If the service gets too heavy, take a break and go out into the hall. Don’t worry, we won’t be hurt.”

Having taken in her physical surroundings, Stephanie turns her attention to the service. Nearly all of the prayers are read aloud—either by the rabbi alone or by the rabbi and the congregation—in English or in Hebrew, with a few read in both languages. All present follow along in English, and a few of the participants also chant with the rabbi in Hebrew. The rabbi frequently announces the page and the part of the service now being performed. When a prayer is sung in Hebrew, many of the people in the room join in, humming the tune if not singing the words. Stephanie feels awkward about joining in, but nevertheless the sound of the chanting feels good and reminds her of visits to the synagogue with her grandparents when she was a girl. Some of the prayers are particularly lively, and the rabbi pounds on the pulpit and shouts, “Sing!”

As the service progresses, the rabbi occasionally pauses to explain the structure and meaning of a prayer. When they get to the

Amidah, the rabbi explains that it is a silent meditation that is the core of the service. He tells them that the entire lengthy prayer is to be read silently, standing up, and he shows them how to take three steps forward to open the prayer and three steps backward at its end. He explains that even though they're always in God's presence, in this central prayer they reaffirm that by taking three steps forward. This enables them to become especially conscious of standing before God, like bowing before an earthly king. The three steps backward after the prayer signify the ending of this intimate moment of communion with God.

During a prayer proclaiming that God has chosen "us" from among the nations, the rabbi pauses and asks what it means that the Jews are a chosen people. When no one responds, he recounts a fable, which Stephanie actually remembers from Sunday school, about how God went to all the other nations and asked them if they wanted the Torah. They all asked what this would entail, and for each group accepting the Torah meant keeping a particular commandment the group was in the habit of breaking. So they all declined God's offer. But when he got to the Jews they joyously said, "We will act and we will listen." Thus, to be chosen means that the Jews have a special relationship with God and that to fulfill that relationship they have to meet certain obligations. Stephanie smiles at the fable. She also begins to get a more vivid sense of the power of belonging to a people with such a long tradition and strong sense of group identity.

Participants frequently stop the rabbi to ask questions about the prayers, their tunes, or some other matter in Jewish life. This morning one of the questions is about evolution and whether Judaism is compatible with evolutionary theory. The rabbi explains that Judaism has no problem with evolutionary theory because the order of creation presented in the Bible does follow an evolutionary pattern. He says, "We know that time in the Bible was expressed in different terms from our contemporary understanding. Since in those days people lived nine hundred years and we don't know what that means, so similarly, the six days of creation could easily refer to a much longer time span by contemporary standards."

Stephanie's attention is captured by this exchange. To the extent that she had thought about Judaism and modern science, they had appeared to her to be fundamentally incompatible. "This man

doesn't fit the stereotype of an Orthodox rabbi who is out of touch with the modern world," she thinks. "He knows all the traditional texts, but he's also well read and informed about contemporary issues."

When the first part of the service is completed, the rabbi explains the reading of the Torah. One chapter is read aloud each week in services, and the entire Torah takes a year to read in this way. He says that although in regular services Torah scrolls are taken out from the ark (*aron hakodesh*) and a trained person, a *ba'al koreh*, chants the weekly portion in a distinct tune, beginners in their service read it aloud together from their Hebrew-English Bibles. Prior to the reading, however, the *dvar torah*, a brief talk related to the weekly portion, is given by a member of the service.

The rabbi calls up the speaker for the week, Michelle, and introduces her. She begins by describing the *parsha* (Torah portion) for that week. It is the story of Moses ascending Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. He was on the mount for forty days and nights, and the people of Israel got impatient and distrustful. They collected all of their gold jewelry and made a golden calf, which they then worshipped. The golden calf was a symbol that was odious to Moses and God because it was used by the Hebrews' Goddess-worshipping neighbors, the Canaanites. Their polytheistic religion was anathema to the leaders of the emerging monotheism. Moses' wrath, reflecting God's, erupted on viewing the pagan rituals, and he smashed the tablets containing the Ten Commandments God had given him for the people. From this story Michelle had gotten the image of a wrathful God who was to be feared. Michelle tells the group that she is a "yeshiva [institution of Jewish education] girl" who had strayed and that she has always been troubled by God's wrathfulness and judgment. She wants to figure out why God is so unforgiving.

She then describes three incidents she observed at a rock concert at Watkins Glen in the early 1970s. All of these, she explains, shook her. First, in a traffic jam on the way to the concert, when a man started honking his horn, the driver from the car in front got out and started beating the horn honker up. Second, at the concert she saw a couple giving their five-year-old daughter sips of wine from their wineskin and tokens of their joint. Third, she witnessed a teenager performing a sexual act.

Now she understands that the phrase “the people . . . have corrupted themselves” (Exodus 32:7) in this week’s Bible portion is also a reference to present-day immoral acts. She can begin to comprehend why God is so angry. And even though she still doesn’t have all the answers to life’s fundamental questions, at least she realizes that she needs to be asking them and that Orthodox Judaism is the framework within which to do so. Stephanie is touched by what Michelle is saying. She, too, had begun to feel uncomfortable with some of the contradictions in the hippie culture in which she had come of age, and she found Michelle’s words an apt expression of her own thoughts and feelings. Michelle finishes talking; people in the service call out, “*Yasher coach*” (You did well); and she returns to her seat.

The rabbi then goes through the *parsha* in English, elaborating on numerous points within the reading. When he comes to the enumeration of the thirteen attributes of God, he emphasizes the attribute of mercy, saying that God is truly a loving, forgiving God who remembers good deeds for thousands of generations but sins for only four. If four generations of Jews don’t observe the Sabbath or the commandments, then they really don’t know what it is to be Jewish anymore. Stephanie thinks about her grandparents, and her own assimilated life, recognizing that she is the second generation of unobservant Jews in her family. For some time now she has been wondering whether she will want to pass on to her children, when she has them, any sense of the tradition and just what she will be able to convey. Participants ask the rabbi questions about the reading. When this section is completed, the service resumes.

By noon, Stephanie is getting tired and hears her stomach grumbling: she hadn’t eaten breakfast because she had no idea that services would last for three hours. The Reform services she had occasionally attended with her parents as a child and as an adult had lasted only one hour. She’s feeling tired; it’s been a very full morning. “It will take a while to sort this out,” she thinks.

At this point the rabbi pauses for announcements, which include the times of the Saturday afternoon services, the meal in between them, and other events in the synagogue that week, such as the visit of a rabbi who will be available to check the condition and kashrut (in this case, ritual propriety) of the congregants’ me-

zuzot (plural of mezuzah, the sacred scroll hung on doorposts of Jewish homes and rooms) and the men's tefillin (phylacteries that Orthodox Jewish men wear when praying). While Stephanie wonders what these words refer to, the rabbi announces the important life events that had occurred to synagogue members that week: births, deaths, weddings, engagements, and bar mitzvahs, as well as the list of people who'd left to study in Israel. The rabbi invites all present to participate in the kiddush (benediction over wine) following the services, saying that there will be wine and grape juice. He explains that this week's kiddush is special because it is in honor of a participant's recent engagement and is sponsored by her mother. He asks people to fold their chairs, make sure to put their Bibles and prayer books back in place, and then come to the back of the room.

He then says that they've reached a special part of the service where newcomers are asked to be extrafriendly and introduce themselves. A few people present, including Stephanie, say their names, and some add where they are from (particularly if from out of state or out of the country) or introduce a fiancé or spouse who has come along. After each person's introduction, the rabbi greets her or him warmly, saying, "Welcome," or "We're glad to have you." Following these introductions, the group sings the *Adon Olam*.

Much to Stephanie's relief everyone now stands up, and she joins the others who are hurriedly folding the chairs and placing them against a side wall. She follows the group (which is now coed) to the back of the room, where people cluster around a table bearing tiny plastic cups of wine and grape juice and paper plates offering bite-size pieces of chocolate and carrot cakes. The rabbi makes his way to the back of the room, stopping to wish a "good Shabbos [Sabbath]"³ and exchange a few hurried words with several people. He invites participants to follow along with the blessings for the wine and cake, and the group recites them together. Stephanie notices that other people are reading these blessings from an English transliteration on a poster on the back wall. At the last few words she softly chimes in. While those assembled recite the blessings, a few women pass around the plates with the beverages and cakes. Stephanie helps herself to some wine and chocolate cake and takes a sip from her plastic cup. "Sweet wine," she

grimaces. "I'd forgotten about this." The cake is good, however, and she helps herself to some more.

A few people smile at her, and she smiles back. One woman introduces herself as Judy. While they're talking, the rabbi comes over and says, "Stephanie, do you have a place for Shabbos lunch?" "Excuse me?" she asks, while marveling that he remembers her name. "Shabbos lunch," he repeats. "That's the meal following services. I'll send you to a family." "Uh . . . no thank you," she says dubiously. He insists, "Really, we do this all the time; there are families who especially ask for newcomers for their table." She hesitates. "Okay," he says. "I'll let the Cohens know you're coming."

Not having any idea what she has got herself into, Stephanie resumes her conversation with Judy, who remarks that she, too, occasionally goes to families' homes for Shabbat meals and that Stephanie will enjoy herself. As they're talking, the rabbi shouts to the group, "Hey! Let's celebrate this engagement!" He begins to sing a lively tune, and within a minute several people have joined in. Stephanie notices that many people who hadn't been at the service have now entered the room. As the singing gets livelier, the rabbi grabs a young man and begins to dance energetically with him, the two of them running around in a circle. Judy explains to Stephanie that the man dancing with the rabbi is the fiancé of the woman whose mother sponsored this kiddush. Other men join the circle, and within a few minutes a group of women have formed a circle of their own. The lively dancing continues for a while to the accompaniment of a variety of joyous Hebrew songs.

While she watches, a medium-build, bespectacled man approaches her and introduces himself as Philip Cohen. Stephanie tells him her name, and he invites her to come along. Once outside, he introduces her to a small group of men and women, ranging in age from their late twenties to late fifties, who are waiting to join them. "This is the crew," he smiles, and they all head west to his home.

As they walk, a young man named Michael falls in step with Stephanie and asks her about herself. This is her first time here, she explains, laughing self-consciously. He grins. "I know what that's like; I myself began a couple of years ago. The first time is the hardest; after that it really does get easier. And you'll see, Effie's

great: you can ask any question at all, and you really can go at your own pace. And you'll be surprised at how quickly you pick things up. Within a year and a half most people graduate to the main service."

"Did you feel dumb when you first walked in?" she asked. "It felt so weird to walk into a Jewish service, as a Jew, and have no idea what's going on! I'm not used to feeling so incompetent!"

He laughs. "Yeah, we all go through that. The Hebrew killed me at first; I felt so inept. But that crash course is great; I really learned to read."

She frowns a little about the crash course but is relieved to hear he had the same feelings. She's about to ask him more, but they've reached the Cohen's apartment building. The group enters the lobby and walks past the bank of elevators to a door leading to a concrete staircase. Stephanie looks at Michael dubiously; he laughs and says, "Their house isn't so bad; it's only on the eleventh floor. I've been to apartments on the twenty-fourth!" She remains skeptical. "I thought this was supposed to be a day of rest," she thinks.

Huffing and puffing (some more than others) the group finally reaches the Cohen's apartment. They are met at the door by a pretty seven-year-old girl, whom Philip introduces as his daughter, Sarah. Philip's wife, Sharon, comes out of the kitchen in an apron to greet her guests. She already knows several, but she warmly welcomes the new people and wishes everyone a good Shabbos. She ducks back into the kitchen while Philip assembles the guests and his three children around the lavishly set dining room table.

As Sharon enters and takes her place, Stephanie looks around the table at the ten assembled people. She wonders if the Cohen's Saturday lunches are always so large. Philip fills his own and everyone else's wine glasses, offering a choice of red or white wine. He recites a longer version of the blessing over the wine than she had heard that morning. Everyone sips wine, and then all ten people leave the table and head toward the kitchen. "We're washing for *hamotzieh*, the blessing over the *challah* [special braided bread for the Sabbath]," Michael whispers to Stephanie.

In the kitchen everyone assembles around the sink, and one at a time each person pours water over her or his hands from a large mug with handles. Sharon waits for Stephanie to reach the sink

and then shows her how to perform the ritual: the mug is held in the right hand and water is poured over the left and vice versa; the entire activity is then repeated. Stephanie feels awkward but copies Sharon's actions. Sharon then hands Stephanie a towel and recites with her, word for word, the Hebrew blessing.

When they all are seated around the table again, Philip uncovers two large loaves of *challah*, slices one of them, and takes a piece. He puts salt on his plate, dips his piece of *challah* into the salt, says a blessing out loud, and eats the bread. Meanwhile, he has passed around the table a plate with the rest of the bread slices. Stephanie imitates the other guests and dunks her *challah* into salt before taking a bite.

Now the meal begins in earnest. For the first course Sharon hands out small plates, each with an oval-shaped piece of gefilte fish on it. Stephanie smiles; she remembers her grandmother's gefilte fish. She hopes this is homemade; any of the bottled versions she'd bought as an adult were never as good. She spoons the red horseradish on her fish, takes a bite, and smiles with pleasure.

While they eat, Sharon, who is seated next to Stephanie, asks her about herself: where she grew up, what kind of Jewish background she had, where she lives, and what kind of work she does. Philip overhears them talking and tells Stephanie that he and Sharon also did not grow up Orthodox but instead came to it as adults. He explains that when his mother died, he was looking for a place to recite the kaddish, the prayer for the dead said for a year following the death of a parent. He went shul "shopping" in the neighborhood, and when he entered Lincoln Square he was so taken with the warmth of the community, and particularly with the rabbi of the main congregation, that he kept coming back. A man at the table chimed in, "Yeah, there's no way you can come there for a year and not get hooked!"

Sharon said that at first she didn't want any part of it, but after Philip had been going for six months and talking so enthusiastically about it, she began to be curious and to feel more open. One day during that time the two of them ran into the rabbi on the street. She was taken by his warmth and impressed that he knew her name. She, too, went to shul the following Saturday. Philip has gone weekly ever since; Sharon frequently joins him. "That was five years ago," she smiles.

The first course finished, Sharon goes into the kitchen and comes out with the next course. There is a salad, a platter of chicken, and a bowl holding some brown food that Stephanie doesn't recognize. As the platters are passed around Stephanie helps herself to chicken and salad and is about to skip the bowl that she now sees contains a curious combination of meat, beans, and potatoes. Philip grins at her, "Try it. My wife makes the best *chulent* on the Upper West Side." Stephanie dubiously puts a little on her plate. Philip explains that *chulent* is a traditional Shabbat lunch dish because it can continue cooking in the warm oven since before the beginning of the Sabbath on Friday evening, and thus they can have hot food for lunch without having to turn on the stove on the Sabbath. Stephanie takes a small mouthful, gulps, and swallows. This dish is a little strange to her, but the rest of the food is delicious, and she eats happily.

During the meal several conversations go on at once. Some of the guests talk with Stephanie about the synagogue and offer suggestions about how to get involved slowly and which adult education classes they'd found helpful. Philip is engaged in a heated discussion with one of the men about the shul's search for a new rabbi now that the founding rabbi has moved to Israel. The children keep chiming in, too, making an altogether lively scene. Several guests enthusiastically discuss various rabbinic commentaries on the Torah portion read that morning.

When the main course is cleared away, the group sings several Hebrew songs. Stephanie has never heard any of them, but she enjoys the sound and feel of their rhythms. The two oldest children sing along. The singing is followed by dessert—fruit and homemade cake—and tea (made from an urn of hot water that is plugged in for the entire Sabbath), and Philip then leads the group in the *bentching*, which, he explains to Stephanie, is the grace after meals. This, too, is sung aloud.

Finally, two hours after they arrived, the guests get up from the table and slowly leave. Stephanie warmly thanks her hosts. They tell her it was a pleasure to have her and that she is welcome back any time. They wish her good luck, and she leaves, this time taking the elevator down. Exhausted, she hops on a bus uptown to her studio apartment, which in contrast feels quiet and empty.

• • •

Beth pulls the covers over her head, trying to block out the sound of the loudspeaker. "*Modeh ani l'fanecha* [I give my thanks to you]," a female voice chants, waking them up with the prayer said immediately on arising. "I'm not ready to get up," Beth grumbles to herself. "It's only 7:00 A.M. and I was up talking until 3:00!" She turns over, but the voice on the loudspeaker persists: "Now it's time to wash *nagel vasser* [morning ritual washing]." Beth slowly pulls herself out of bed, beginning the morning routine that in the three weeks since she's been at Bais Chana, a Lubavitch Hasidic learning center for women, has become almost automatic. (The Lubavitch Hasidim are a sectarian group of ultra-Orthodox Jews.) She walks to the bowl of water in the center of the room, which is placed, according to the Lubavitch interpretation of this hand-washing ritual, so that everyone can reach it within three steps. Four of her six roommates are still in bed; the other two are at the bowl, one by one performing the morning ritual of pouring water over her hands from a large cup with handles. Beth waits her turn, washes, and says the blessing, which she already knows by heart. She then shuffles into the large bathroom across the hall. Meanwhile, Cindy, a nineteen-year-old *madricha* (counselor and teacher) from South Africa, is walking into the room on her morning wake-up rounds.

When Beth returns to her room she makes her bed and dresses in the three-quarter-length sleeved blouse and long skirt she'd asked her mother to send a week ago. She puts on nylon knee-high socks under her sandals, thereby leaving no skin bare, and proceeds upstairs for breakfast. She's still uncomfortable in so many clothes in July. Yet she finds herself smiling, looking forward to talking with her new friends at breakfast and taking the day's classes.

Beth, a twenty-nine-year-old woman, had spent most of her twenties in a community of "born-again" Christians she had met through a group of friends at junior college. She enjoyed belonging to that warm, close group of people who spent a lot of time talking, praying, and doing charity work together. She was also attracted to their idea that as believers they would play an important part in ushering in the kingdom of God, which was coming soon. Her

parents—although not observant Jews themselves—had been quite upset about her involvement in Christianity. “Even though we don’t follow all the laws like Grandma and Grandpa did,” her mother said, “we are still Jews and are part of the chain of tradition that’s gone on for thousands of years.”

When her mother suggested she talk with a Lubavitch couple, a rabbi in a yeshiva and his wife, a *shadchan* (matchmaker), who were doing outreach work in a nearby town, Beth agreed to meet them. The Sternblooms were generous and accepting people, and Beth felt comfortable with them. Sarah, the rabbi’s wife, invited Beth to accompany the family to an Orthodox girls’ sleepaway camp they were going to for July Fourth weekend.

Beth went along and greatly enjoyed the weekend. The Shabbos rituals reminded her of those she’d enjoyed observing with her grandparents and occasionally even with her parents when she was a child: lighting Shabbos candles, eating a special meal, singing at the table, discussing Jewish subjects. Being there, she felt the same sense of belonging as with her Christian friends, but in the camp she also felt the stirring of comforting memories and the feeling that *this* was hers.

Seeing how happy Beth was at the camp, Sarah told her about Bais Chana. Sarah described it as a residential center run by the Lubavitch Hasidim where young women at all levels of knowledge could learn about Judaism. Because Beth had been struggling for six years to support herself on the meager wages of a computer operator and was currently unemployed, she immediately wondered how she could afford such a place. Sarah assured Beth that she shouldn’t be concerned about the money: if she was interested she should attend, and if necessary, the expenses could be picked up by the Lubavitch. Sarah told her that by living and studying together, the girls (the Lubavitch term for unmarried women of all ages) at Bais Chana become close. Beth, who had begun to wonder—with her parents’ assistance—if she belonged in her Christian community, liked the image Sarah was creating and thought, “Why not? I’m going to collect unemployment anyway this summer. I might as well find out what it’s like. I have nothing to lose” (she could leave after a week if she didn’t like Bais Chana). And now, three and a half weeks later, she occasionally stops to wonder at how quickly she has made friends and adapted to the routines. But she feels comfortable and at home.

On her way upstairs for breakfast she passes young women coming out of other rooms who are also heading to the dining room. Once upstairs, Beth enters a large lobby hung with the posters that were the first items she saw on her arrival. The largest sign, in colored letters, announces, "Welcome to Bais Chana." Other posters offer details about kosher foods, the mitzvot (commandments) that the women should do daily, an oak-tag sheet with all their names and a star next to their names for each of the mitzvot they perform each day, and a huge sign, changed daily, that announces the day's schedule. She glances at the list of today's classes and heads into the dining room.

The large dining room is furnished with three rows of long tables and chairs. A painting of the Rebbe, a bearded, white-haired, benevolent-looking man, smiles at them from over the mantle on the right wall. The Rebbe, she's learned, is the head of the Lubavitch movement and is adored by all members of his community. The Lubavitch Hasidim go to him for advice on every type of personal and religious question. Since she's been at Bais Chana she's seen the *madrichot* (plural of *madricha*) help a few of the women compose letters to the Rebbe. Perhaps she'll write one, too, she's been thinking. Pictures of the Rebbe are throughout the house, and some women have brought their own. Beth walks to the wall opposite the picture and from a large table helps herself to silverware, a napkin, and a plate. She joins a small group of young women at the middle table.

With Beth are both "BTs" and "lifers," the main types of women at the institute. BT, she's learned, is an abbreviation for *ba'alat teshuvah*, a woman not brought up Orthodox who as an adult chooses Orthodoxy, whereas lifer refers to a woman brought up in the Lubavitch community. (The main one is in Crown Heights in Brooklyn; there are many other Lubavitch communities around the world established where the Rebbe sent *shlichim* [representatives] to do so.) There are also potential BTs at the table—that is, women who are new to the Lubavitch and who, like Beth, have been sent to Bais Chana by a Lubavitch rabbi or *rebbe'tzin* (rabbi's wife) in their hometown. The woman sitting at Beth's right is a convert from Christianity. A couple of the women at the table are *madrichot*; the *madrichot* comprise BTs and lifers. Within the house, at least one *madricha* sleeps in each room with the other women.

Some of the women eat breakfast quietly, still groggy. Others

talk about the previous night's class, which, like all evening classes, was taught by Rabbi Friedman. Cindy tells the group she woke up this morning with the song "We Want Moshiach [the Messiah] Now" running through her mind, which means the previous night's class must have been great. A couple of women talk about the new campaign initiated by the Rebbe to get all Jews to have a letter of the Sefer Torah (scrolls of the Torah) inscribed in their names. One of the lifer *madrichot* explains the *miytza* (project, campaign) to Beth. The *madricha* says that Torah scrolls are all written by hand by a trained scribe. When a new Torah is being inscribed, Jews may donate a sum of money in order to have a letter (usually the first letter of their Hebrew name) inscribed in their name. The Lubavitch are interested in promoting the unity of all Jews; by getting many different Jews to have letters in the Torah, their names will be together in the scrolls, thus bringing these people closer together. Beth thinks, "This is what I love about this group: the people all have so much energy and commitment, so much *ahavas Yisroel* [love for fellow Jews]." Two others at the table are also very excited about the *miytza* and make plans to hand out sign-up sheets to all the women that day.

After they eat breakfast, many of the women wander back to their rooms to finish dressing. Beth hangs around in the lobby, waiting for her beginners' prayer group. (Morning prayers are divided into beginners, intermediate, and advanced.) In this group, which Cindy leads, most of the prayers are read in English, and many explanations of the prayers and rituals are offered. Four other women attend the group this morning, none of whom knows Hebrew. Cindy encourages them to study Hebrew in the afternoons in a *chavrusa*, a one-on-one study session in which the *madrichot* teach the women whatever they're interested in.

After prayers, and before Rabbi Friedman's class begins at 10:00, Beth has about fifteen minutes, so she wanders back down to her room to write a letter. She finds three of her roommates getting dressed. Malkie, who is eighteen, and Liz, who is nearly twenty, chose to room together because they are close friends; they have been involved with the Lubavitch for a couple of years. Beth enjoys hearing their stories of the previous summer and winter sessions at Bais Chana and asking them about Crown Heights, where they live in the Lubavitch girls' dorm and attend classes at Bais Rivka, the yeshiva there for women.