One woman came with an ovarian growth and a firm faith that God would heal it. As we prayed, I was concerned for this woman, when I sensed God telling me, “Don’t worry; I’ve got this one.” The follow-up ultrasound showed a normal ovary . . .

I did not grow up with aspirations of becoming a doctor, though my family certainly has a scientific bent. My father was an optical engineer as well as an optometrist. My mother began as a chemist; later she taught high school chemistry.

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I was born October 15, 1953 in Queens, New York City, the youngest of three children, with a brother two years older and a sister four years older than I. As far back as I can remember, my world was strongly (culturally) Jewish. My grandparents, (who were a regular and important part of our family life) spoke mostly Yiddish, and my parents spoke it when the subject matter was not for our ears. We had grand feasts for Chanukah, with hundreds of relatives gathered in a rented rumpus room of an apartment building. And what a rumpus we made, with dreidls, dozens of “latke stations,” and proud cooks who each tried to prove the superiority of their recipe by the number of people who would stand in line for their latkes. Passover was a smaller circle of extended family, with a formidable feast and an abbreviated Haggadah.

We had a smaller feast on Yom Kippur—why, you ask, should we feast on a day of fasting? My family knew exactly what the Day of Atonement stood for, but they had no reason to afflict their souls (which they didn’t believe they had) in obedience to a God whom they didn’t believe existed. You see, despite strong cultural and ethnic Jewish identification, our family, at least as far back as my great-grandparents, was atheistic. My father was the most militantly so, in the name of “science, rationalism and humanism.”

Yet I had a sure sense that God was watching me from a very young age. I don’t remember ever talking to him or asking for anything. I do remember lying in bed wondering if I would be more disrespectful to God by sleeping on my back, in which case my genitals would be facing heavenward, or on my belly, in which case my derriere would be towards him. What a dilemma for a child of four or five! I think the silent and fearful tenor of my childish concern in some way reflected my relationship with my father. Somehow I received reassurance from the Almighty that I need not worry about such things, but it didn’t develop into a relationship.

I must have asked my father about God; I don’t recall the question, but I can well remember the extensive orientation that he gave me to his atheistic viewpoint. He stated categorically that there simply is no God, it is a primitive idea fabricated by weak people who need a crutch; the rational man stands on his own by the superiority of his reason etc., etc. By the age of seven or eight, I could argue the atheist position vociferously and with great certainty. I teamed up with a like-minded buddy and together we took on other kids in lengthy and heated battles of the wits. We knew we had won whenever a believing young soul burst into tears as confusion filled his mind and doubt assaulted his tender heart.

My denial of God had no effect on my ethnic sense of Jewishness. Our daily struggle was to remain unnoticed and unmolested by a certain group of Catholic school boys who poured out of school with what seemed to be a lot of pent
up hostility. We Jews tended to aggress one another with mental challenges (as stated above) and compared to others our age, it seemed we were physically meek. I learned, from my parents of all people, the instructions of Jesus to “turn the other cheek.” The only problem was, when I turned my cheek my nose would also turn . . . not merely to the side, but a little up in the air! I felt decidedly superior—“above” the impulse to fight—which also served to disguise my abject fear.

I attended a progressive Yiddishe shul on Saturdays, beginning at the age of eight. We learned Yiddish language and literature, Jewish history, songs, dances—all within the context of a leftist political stance. There was always some activity relating to the civil rights movement, workers’ solidarity or the anti-war movement. I graduated to the Mitlshul and attended there until graduating from high school. There was always a high percentage of scoffers at Mitlshul—kids who only came because their parents forced them. I wanted to be there, even when I arrived bleary-eyed after a night of smoking pot with my rock and roll band.

Every week as we walked from the subway to the Mitlshul on 14th Street and Broadway, we passed an intense, unkempt black man who continually waved his Bible and shouted, “Trust in Christ Jesus and remember to pray.” As New Yorkers, we were inured to every type of mishigos imaginable (we barely noticed the lady who hollered angrily at invisible adversaries in phone booths), but this man and his message were somehow different. I found myself defending him to my jeering friends.

As a teenager I had begun to recognize a spiritual emptiness which I sought to fill in typical ’60s and ’70s form, through yoga, Zen, drugs and the occult. One Saturday in Mitlshul, my literature professor told me that he perceived a mystical bent in me, then assigned me to write a paper on false messianic movements. The research I did for that assignment was my first introduction to religious concepts of Judaism, such as our need for redemption and a messiah.

I graduated high school at age 16, having had accelerated classes, which in effect caused me to skip the eighth grade. I enrolled at Queens College and became a music major, while my hunger for spiritual truth continued to grow. With no one to guide me toward faith, I delved further into Eastern religion and drug experiences in order to “scratch the itch.” At one point I even went to a Billy Graham crusade at Madison Square Garden. There I sat, all alone in the midst of this huge crowd. I felt something like embarrassment over the simplicity of faith these folks had, yet I felt stung by Graham’s words about sin and pride. I knew he was talking about me, and had to restrain myself from going forward for the altar call. Whatever the truth was, I felt it had to be more complex than the plainspoken message I had heard.
At age 18 I bicycled across the continental U.S., sleeping in fields, campsites, parks or wherever . . . and if there was no appropriate place to lay our sleeping bags, we’d ask for permission to sleep in the county jail. (Actually the “we” was for the first half of the trip only—half way through my companion and I had a parting of the ways.) The eight to ten hours of daily pedaling seemed to help me discharge years of anger over unnamed fears and unexplained emptiness. I seemed to gain some peace of soul, plus I was drug-free during the trip, and that felt great.

The following year I traveled in East Africa—Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia. I had a real wanderlust and a hope that I might find some real meaning in more “primitive” cultures. I did not find what I was looking for and did not experience the same benefits I had on the cross-country trip. In fact, after six months the highest goal that I could imagine for myself was to return home to the woman I was then dating and become a heroin addict (I didn’t know what that would entail, and in fact I did not become an addict, but it seemed about right for me at the time)! After a bout with malaria, I returned to Queens College where I was a music major, but gradually petered out in those studies. I remember noting that I felt really old, more like 40 than 19.

While at Queens, I met and fell in love with Diana. When she graduated in 1975 we decided to move to Berkeley, California with other musician friends and try to “make it” as a jazz band. We played wild, frenetic music and actually had a small following for about a year.

One summer Diana and I traveled through Oregon and went to a jam session. The bass player was David Friesen, (a well known recording artist with some Jewish background). He preached the gospel with a power I had never heard before! He asked if I wanted to be baptized, and I said “sure.” I don’t think his explanation of baptism fully registered with me, and though I was moved once again by the gospel message, I figured this was just another religious ritual. (“I’ll try anything, once,” I thought.) That night, after being baptized from a tea cup, there was a presence that Diana and I could sense, but there was also a sense
of conviction regarding our lifestyle which we weren’t yet ready to handle.

For the next two years I went headlong in the opposite direction, trying to develop my own righteousness through intense meditation, a strict vegetarian diet, kundalini yoga and the like. Despite the intense energy I expended to improve myself, I found myself caught up in the things I despised: adultery, lies, drugs and tobacco addiction.

The pain in my soul seemed to press every spark of joy out of my life. One day while I was kvetching to my girlfriend she threw the New Testament at me (the bass player had given it to us), saying, “Read this!” And I did. It was like being hit with a brick. The righteousness I was trying so desperately (yet unsuccessfully) to produce had been offered to me as a free gift! As I continued to read, I fell in love with Jesus, but my journey was far from over. At that time I was in the sway of a small-time guru. My ignorance of God’s true character combined with my insatiable need to be spiritually acceptable kept me devoted to this fellow, who, unknown to me, was undermining my relationship with Diana.

Finally, in order to preserve her own sanity, she left without telling anyone. I was devastated. To make a long story short, she ended up 3,000 miles away receiving Jesus through her sister’s prayer group. Back in Berkeley, I cried out to Jesus for help. He opened my eyes and I saw this guru for what he was. God gave me a new confidence, enabling me to sever the relationship and make a long overdue commitment to the Lord, and to Diana, who became my wife. My decision to follow Jesus was a stepwise process over several years, which culminated on October 18, 1977.

After my decision, I still needed to be delivered from some of the dark spiritual forces that I’d unknowingly opened myself up to during my spiritual journey. Diana and I eventually moved into a Christian retreat center in Oakland. During this period I had some one-on-one Bible instruction with some people from Jews for Jesus.

Certain things changed rapidly once Jesus was a central person in my life. I brought my fears before him and found that I could let go of them. I was no longer subject to the tailspin into destructive expressions of anger or depression that had previously been a pattern. Other issues seemed to require much time and healing.

For several years I still was intent on escaping from the world and its responsibilities. I was working as a woodwind instrument repair man—tucked in the back of a shop. The “retreat” setting certainly exemplified my desire to not be involved in society. Then one day, it was as if the Lord spoke these simple words to my heart: “What are you saving it all for?” After all, God had literally saved me from incredible pitfalls into which I had seen others fall, never to be restored. Suddenly I realized that the blessings God had given me—a good education, good health, a sound mind—were meant to be used to serve Him. The next words I heard astounded me: “Become a doctor!”

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Generation J
by Lisa Schiffman
HarperSanFrancisco (1999) US $18.00

“I hadn’t a clue about what it meant to be a Jew. I was lost, a Jew without a path.” And so begins 35-year-old Lisa Schiffman’s search. It’s a search for identity, for meaning, for answers. Generation J is an attempt to sort through the confusion of being part of a generation that is willing neither to make a full return to Judaism nor to abandon its Jewish persona completely.

Of being in a generation whose parents either followed religious traditions by rote or rejected them altogether. Of being a third-generation American Jew who’s uncomfortable with and suspicious of any kind of organized religion, particularly her own.

In an autobiography that reads like anthropological field notes [she is a social anthropologist by training], Schiffman presents a hodgepodge of stories offering the reader snapshots of Jewish life and thought. She begins with a very vulnerable and personal narrative about interfaith marriage. Schiffman was committed to having a Jew officiate at the wedding when she married her fiance, Michael, a lapsed Unitarian. Several rabbis turned them down because they wouldn’t agree to have a “Jewish home.” Finally, a cantor who moonlights as both an opera singer and an actor performed their wedding ceremony.

Schiffman writes that she’s still seeking validation for her marriage from the Jewish community. She interviews a Reform rabbi from New York who performs weddings for gay couples but refuses to marry a mixed faith couple. Told by the rabbi that her husband would have to embrace a Jewish life and the Jewish community (that he’d have to set a
seder table, take their kids to Hebrew school, stand by her side while she lights Shabbat candles), she’s incredulous. Schiffman knows that she is Jewish, but she has never done those things.

Questions form the backbone of this book. What does it mean to have a Jewish home? Is Judaism a religion, a culture or a race? I know I’m Jewish, but how do I know that? What does it mean to look “too Jewish?” Or not Jewish enough? Is it possible to be Jewish alone and separate from the Jewish community?

In each narrative, Schiffman asks good questions but admits to a lack of adequate answers. There is no doubt that it was for very personal reasons that she wrote this book. Schiffman is a searcher and she wants to find spiritual answers. Her questions are an attempt to sort through the confusion of the religious netherworld of American secular Judaism.

In Schiffman’s definition of Judaism, we are a “dark and hairy people” who practice a “strange, argumentative, incomprehensible religion.” Yet she’s still inexplicably drawn to a world she hasn’t experienced—blessings over the Torah, fasting on Yom Kippur, payos and long skirts. For her, being Jewish is about being conflicted, about never being certain who you are and where you’re going and what that means. It’s about having an identity crisis.

This book chronicles more than the author’s own exploration into the meaning of Judaism. It offers a picture into the spiritual quandary of secular Jews today within the larger Christian culture. Schiffman grew up in the largely non-Jewish town of Levittown, New York. She described the place of her birth as “home to one of the largest crosses in the Western hemisphere.” She recalls a childhood incident when “Christian friends invited me to church.” After standing and sitting more times than she can count, Schiffman partakes of the Catholic communion wafer and waits for a “Christlike feeling to arise” in her. It doesn’t. She ponders why and then goes on.

Perhaps the most important question is the one that Schiffman failed to ask in 166 pages: Can you really find your Jewish identity apart from God?

She muses, “If Christianity’s message was Follow your heart, Judaism’s was Follow the directions.”

“Jews, however,” she says, “…never follow directions without asking why….In spite of our mandate to follow the directions, millions of Jews—the unaffiliated, secular, atheist indifferent or simply confused—are lost.”

Like many in this post-assimilation generation, she looks everywhere for answers, for a solution to that lostness, with one exception—God, the only real source for answers.

In a recent interview, Schiffman was asked, if she could add a postscript to the book, what it would be. Her answer was, “You can create your own path through religion….And if there is another book, that would be the beginning of the next one, something like, ’P.S., I’m still doing it, piecing the route together.’”

Perhaps she should look to another book—the Bible—it has already pieced that route together for Lisa and the rest of us.

—Athena Kolbe

1Danielle Svetcov
Generation J (San Francisco Examiner Magazine, 12/12/99) p. 32
I said, “Lord, how can this be? I have no money, I have two small children to support, I’m older than the usual medical school applicant, and I don’t believe much of the mindset they’d be teaching me!” Yet the thought would not leave me.

Beginning that very day, various “coincidences” began to present themselves and seemed to confirm what I thought God was telling me. But I still had doubts. Finally, after nearly a year of praying about it, a wise and very blunt pastor heard my story and said, “Well, you better hurry up and get started—you’re not getting any younger!” The doors opened and the Lord provided for all our needs throughout the whole process of pre-med courses, med school, and Family Practice residency, spanning a period of ten years.

Presently I work in a rural clinic in Soledad focusing on pre-natal and obstetrical care, with predominantly Mexican and Mexican-American migrant workers. Many patients, while they believe in God, have not thought to take their particular problem to him. They are often surprised that their doctor wants to pray with them. I also have a practice in Salinas where more than 90% of the patients believe in Jesus, and we regularly pray during the visits.

Sometimes I learn about faith from these patients. One woman came with an ovarian growth and a firm faith that God would heal it. As we prayed, I was worrying about which medicine to choose for this woman, when I sensed the Spirit of God assuring me, “Don’t worry; I’ve got this one.” The follow-up ultrasound showed a normal ovary!

My heart echoes the words of Psalm 116:12, 13: “How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD.” And I understand just what one of Jesus’ disciples meant when Jesus asked the twelve, “‘You do not want to leave too, do you?’ . . . Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God’” (John 6:67, 68, 69).