Nominated for the National Jewish Book Award

ONE WOMAN'S

WORDS on FIRE

JOURNEY INTO THE SACRED

"An absorbing, down-to-earth story [of Ochs's] attempt to integrate all that holds meaning for her" —*Milwaukee Journal*

VANESSA L. OCHS

A HARVEST/HBJ BOOK

WORDS ON FIRE

One Woman's Journey into the Sacred

Vanessa L. Ochs

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I went to Jerusalem to study Torah.

I had not believed I would ever go off on any sort of spiritual journey. I regarded seekers as yearners by nature, people who suffered tragedies and, overwhelmed by their pain, packed their bags, ventured to mountaintop retreats, and found illumination. They would return to the real world still practicing the mountaintop dietary regime and wearing queer fringed undergarments or headdresses, to friends who greeted this newfound serenity with skepticism: anything that worked this well and this fast had to be temporary; anything that curtailed free will was an affront to individualism.

To make your spiritual yearning public, I thought, was to announce that you were wounded. To turn deeply into religion was to admit that your own resources were so weak you had to resort to magic and miracle cures for healing. To acquire faith was to mobilize the powers of an overly active imagination.

If I held myself aloof from the sect of seekers, it was because I liked to believe I possessed sufficient resources to shield myself from private disasters. And should I nevertheless have to confront adversity, I liked to believe I would grit my teeth and bob back up again without the help of external palliatives: religion, psychiatry, drugs, or early morning jogging. In a word, I had faith in myself.

I was living in an upstate New York college town, in the little red house with a moss-covered roof that was originally Mrs. Sagal's chicken coop. The house was across the road from Mr. Wilcox's apple orchard and cider mill. Like everyone else, we never locked our doors. That way Mary Hess's granddaughters could always leave baskets of currants and cherry tomatoes in our kitchen or borrow the bicycle pump from our garage. This was real country, earthy and, until the Burger King and then Ames came, pristine. We didn't need little pseudo–folk art ducks or dotted "country lifestyle" wallpaper to summon a rural aura. In Hamilton, we dug our way out of snow drifts from November to May, and when the snow was too high, we could cross-country ski across the field and still make it to work. Summers we held our breath when tractors loaded with manure went by, swam with friends from the biology and Russian departments at the Lebanon reservoir, and picked raspberries and blackberries up on Spring Hill Road. If a sign said Cattle Crossing, we stopped the car and waited as cows slowly shifted from the pasture into their white barn.

In this Norman Rockwell setting, where time seemed to have stopped at the turn of the century and civic life revolved around a town green, I taught college and wrote. I was married and had two little girls. If mice invaded our cupboards, I toweled up the droppings I first mistook for tea leaves, trapped the mice live, and set them free in our woods. When children needed something to do, it was safe enough to dispatch them, with a dog as company, to the stream to dig up clay. When we got angry at ourselves or at each other, we went out for a walk and breathed in the lingering smell of

the wood-burning stoves until we calmed down. While I did not want to spend the rest of my days in Hamilton lest I wilt from the dull peacefulness and from a lack of occasions to change from my scruffy farm clothes into something more stylish, I was grateful that during the time we lived there we had good jobs and good friends. And our relatives, who all lived out of town, flourished as well. We never had to attend a funeral.

The abundance of simple happinesses was contagious. When fast-talking New Yorkers, once addicted to Chinese food and the latest movies, joined the faculty, they eventually succumbed to the serenity and began planting radishes in neat rows or stripping and staining antique furniture picked up for a song at Depuy's auction off Route 20. I watched my own house fill up with herbs hanging upside down to dry and turn-of-the-century pine washstands.

I used to wonder if the faith I had in myself would stand up if put to the test. I feared that we and our bounty of blessings were a set of exceptionally fragile crystal vases on a low, vulnerable shelf: no precautions could be taken, and everything could be shattered in a moment. Each time my daydreams of disaster faded and I returned to my real life, so good and safe and comfortable, I was jabbed by a thought: sanctify this life, make it holy. I harbored a small panic. If put to the test, whether trivial or of Job-like proportions, would my powers suffice to make everything better?

Then I started getting sick regularly, and it was no longer necessary to conjure up hypothetical disasters. Nearly each winter there was another illness: pericarditis, hepatitis, thyroiditis, some other "itis" whose name I missed because I just didn't want to know anymore. The periods of acute sickness, though annoying, were nowhere as trying as the long recoveries that burdened my family. Wiped out for months, overwhelmed by the least thing, I dragged around, still skinny and frail, teaching and mothering with minimal effectiveness, until the healing warmth of late spring finally came to Hamilton and I'd be my old self again. Our family doctor couldn't

connect the diseases. "A run of bad luck," "It could be worse" was all he could offer. Hematologists, neurologists, and endocrinologists in Syracuse and Rochester tried to trace some immunological deficiency, testing me for the most awful diseases. All came up blank. Certainly I was stressed by too much work and caring for small children, but all my women friends lived similarly. While they were always frayed at the edges and picked up every virus their kids brought back from the Chenango Nursery School, they managed to remain essentially robust. It wasn't fair.

My illnesses weren't deadly, but they were serious. Though I recovered thanks to accurate diagnoses and treatments, I became anxious with the approach of the new winter, fearful of another round. Understandably so, since I believed that the next inflammation would be the one to cause irreparable damage. Heart, liver, thyroid. Would my brain be next? I had no guarantees, no preventive measures at my disposal. I was too vulnerable, a sitting duck. I desperately needed to have some control over my health, some protection.

I blamed myself. There had to be something I was doing wrong. Surely if I were living right, I would not be such an easy target for sickness. This was the wisdom of my childhood, that sickness was a punishment from God that one brought upon oneself. I knew this explanation was a wicked lie conceived to engender guilt, but I had hit on no other rational or scientific explanation.

I had rapidly lost all confidence in my self-sufficiency. I came to see that initial faith I had in myself as nothing but an arrogant fantasy. I was scared.

From time to time I went to university church services at Colgate when freshman advisees invited me to hear their gospel chorus. But for the sermons of Coleman Brown, the University Chaplain, attending this generic Christian service might have been no more than a polite and easy ecumenical gesture. Each time I went I was jolted to tears by his words, which were never limited to a Christian's

experience. I learned from him that there need be no shame in deriving personal strength from attending to the sacred. That experience forced me to recognize I was starving for some spiritual succor, something more than my doctor's platitudes. Though I doubted my capacity to be shored up with spiritual strength, I knew I needed to fortify myself somehow. And though I had little inclination to become more religious, there was that thought that kept returning: sanctify this life. I could hardly remember the last time I occupied myself with anything resembling spiritual concerns. I must have been a teenager, reading e.e. cummings and *The Little Prince,* with Simon and Garfunkel or 1967 Israeli victory songs playing in the background as I poured out my feelings into my tear-stained diary.

Good sense told me not to wait till it was too late before doing something for myself. I knew that I should heed that instinct to sanctify. But what should I sanctify? How? I knew what the sanctified life was not. Not a life filled with more rituals, more scrupulously observed. Not more praying. Not becoming a better person, being more charitable, more concerned with everyone else's pains. Sanctifying had something to do with a sense of constant wonder—feeling gratitude and finding significance everywhere, in every action, relationship, and object. The sanctified life was pure, calm, and full; it held no reproach, no disappointments.

The specifics of this sanctified life—how to go about the business of sanctifying as a Jew—eluded me. My own religious life had gone stale. Studying Torah never crossed my mind as a solution; it was more farfetched than joining a convent. (Truly more farfetched. Twice, I had accompanied a devout Catholic friend to the nearby Mount Savior monastery, where we listened to the monks chant psalms.)

When I finally came to immerse myself in Jewish learning, I believed the purpose of my study was to fill gaps in my knowledge. Tentatively, so privately I hardly admitted it to myself, I also hoped

my study might amount to something more, that it might have curative powers. That I might know better how to live right. But I didn't count on it.

The idea of studying Torah came to me slowly, over the period of years when my husband, Peter, and I used to bring Colgate University students to Jerusalem during January for a four-week mini-course in ethnic and religious diversity. I looked forward to those trips. Going anywhere would have been energizing, simply to break Hamilton's winter regime, particularly during the winters I was ill. Jerusalem appealed to me, because dwelling on spiritual matters there was as matter of fact as talking about child care arrangements was in Hamilton. In Jerusalem, I could flirt with spirituality without declaring myself a bona fide seeker.

On our first visit to Jerusalem, made before I started to become ill, I had met a woman originally from Worcester, Massachusetts. I will call her Esther. She lived across the hall from us in our building on Michlin Street in Bayit Vegan, a hillside neighborhood in southwest Jerusalem. I doubt I would have spent time with Esther if we didn't both have toddlers of the same age who played together. Esther could have come from a different planet. Yet we found so much to talk about and eventually became intimate friends.

Esther was extremely observant. She wore a red wig, which, I gather, approximated her natural hair color; she dressed modestly, and she spent all week absorbed in elaborate preparations for the Sabbath. She devoted all her free time in winter to preparing for the Passover holiday in ways that were new to me, for example, by checking every pocket in the household for the bread and cookie crumbs that were prohibited on Passover. She made space in her tiny apartment for one red-headed baby after another, each named after two dead relatives: Yosef Menachem, Sarah Baila, Mendel Efraim. There were three children when I first met her, then four, then five. There are more now; there will be more later. Esther was always either pregnant or nursing, and I found it disconcerting that I had no idea what her normal figure was like.

In Hamilton, home to about a dozen Jewish families, I was considered to be as extreme in my observance as I knew Esther to be in hers. People thought of me, ethnically identifiable by my looks and language (a toned-down country version of Jewish New Yorkese), as an alien from a Jewish planet. Every time the college held a "women in religion" panel, I was tapped to play the Jewish woman. Once, when I placed some Hebrew National hot dogs (the only kosher food carried by our small Grand Union) on the checkout counter, the cashier asked: "Are you one of those Hasidics?" In Hamilton, I might as well have been. I could chant the prayers in Hebrew, I more or less observed the Sabbath and holidays, I drove to a kosher butcher in Syracuse once a month to buy meat.

But compared to Esther's religious observance, so strict and scrupulous, mine was consistent only in its always being low key and idiosyncratic. I observed the Sabbath by refraining from chores and professional work, but I did perform other activities prohibited on the Sabbath. I turned on lights, I used the phone, I drew pictures with my daughter. The practices I did observe were the same ones I had grown up with. Thus, if we had practiced a ritual in my childhood, I considered it normal; if we hadn't, I thought it bizarre and primitive. The rituals I retained from childhood had nothing to do with belief in God or a sense of obligation to fulfill commandments. I felt nostalgia for my family's traditions and was fond of those rituals that were particularly aesthetic, like lighting Sabbath candles or ushering the Sabbath out with a twisted candle, wine, and spices. Rarely did kindling lights, reciting blessings, or keeping kosher cause me to dwell on the presence of God. The rituals were ethnic activities Jews performed, family activities. Growing up, no one ever spoke of the rituals as opportunities to experience the sacred. The family practiced them partly to honor our ancestors, partly—we jested—to keep lightning from striking. For me as an adult, these rituals provided comfort and structure; they kept me from helter-skelter. Like beginning the day with coffee, like keeping

a diary. Practicing the ritual was sufficient to give some order to life. It required no belief.

Esther's piety was not simpleminded. Her husband said of her, "She can cook, but mostly she thinks. People think that a woman who covers her head is, in fact, covering her brains. They see a woman wearing a head covering and they assume she is either closed-minded or not a serious person." Esther was a sharp and constant thinker. So was her husband, Reuven (formerly Robert), who had raced through a doctorate in mathematics at the University of Chicago by the time he was twenty-two. His turning to Orthodox Judaism followed classic contours. Before beginning his first teaching job at Columbia University, he backpacked through Greece, India, and Israel on a lark. At the Western Wall in Jerusalem, he met a representative of a yeshiva who convinced him to spend a few days exploring his Jewish roots, which, until that summer, he had assiduously denied. He never left the world of the yeshiva. He immigrated to Israel, became a thoroughly devout Jew, and sat for hours and then years learning Torah. Not for a degree, not for ordination, although that would eventually be conferred upon him. Just to learn for its own sake.

Late at night, after returning from the yeshiva, Reuven, a robust and rotund man nearly bursting out of his black suit, would call on my husband, and together they'd drink whiskey at our kitchen table, lean back in their chairs, and work noisily through a few lines of a sacred text. Peter was delighted to have such an intense partner for Torah study, but he felt guilty about keeping Reuven from home. If Peter stayed out as long as Reuven did, I'd be desperate for his company and for help with the house and the kids. And I'd be angry. Why wasn't Esther exasperated with Reuven for leaving her with the kids day after day, all day long? Why wasn't she resentful when he abandoned her at night as well, to study with friends, just for the joy of it?

In the shady park in Bayit Vegan, where my daughter and Esther's three small children played, Esther told me that when her children napped and slept and when Reuven was out at night, she, too, studied Torah.

An Orthodox woman studying Torah? That took me by surprise. I couldn't even picture Esther surrounded by sacred texts. I told her I thought that the ideal Orthodox woman was a hausfrau. As a girl, she had learned enough of *halakhah* (literally "going" or "walking," figuratively the teachings that are followed, or the Jewish law) to run a home and observe the Sabbath and holy days. I assumed, as well, that before her wedding her mother had taught her how to comply with the laws of family purity, that is, when to abstain from sexual relations during and after menstruation, when to dip into the ritual bath. And that, I thought, was it.

"What made you think that?" Esther asked, as we guided our children home.

I replied that anyone who had read Isaac Bashevis Singer's story "Yentl" or had seen Barbara Streisand in the movie knew there was no place for a woman in the Jewish house of study. If a religious woman wanted to become learned in Torah, she, like Yentl, had to disguise herself as a man, literally or figuratively.

Esther asked if I believed everything I read and saw in the movies.

But I had more evidence. If I called to mind any Orthodox synagogue I had ever been to, the picture was essentially the same. The women sat in their section, half looking at their prayer books and Bibles, half tending their children and chatting. The men, whose attention wandered during the preliminary prayers, grew more alert for the Torah service. They waited to see who would be awarded Torah honors that morning. Those chosen took turns going up to the front of the synagogue. Some recited blessings over the Torah, others read from it, another blessed the one who made the blessings, another held the Torah up, and another covered it in its mantle. And all paraded with it until it was returned to the ark. Anyone watching

the men shaking each other's hands in congratulations after having received any of these Torah honors would have to conclude that the Torah belonged to men. Only men were invested with the power to reenact the ultimate man-God scenario, the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. The man who chanted the Torah was like God, the man who called up the men who would recite benedictions was like Moses, the men who recited the benedictions were like the Israelites assembled to receive the Torah.

In such a synagogue, a little girl could easily realize her Electra fantasies. While her mother sat cordoned off with the other women, she, being just a child, a neuter, and not a bona fide woman, could sit with her father in the men's section, near the Torah. Sitting in his lap, snuggling against his prayer shawl, she would finger its fringes. The rabbi would slam his book down and beg the women to quiet down. When the Torah was carried by in the procession, Daddy would hold her up to kiss it. But when she turned twelve, her gender all too visible, she would be sent back to the women, banished, no longer an honorary man.

Esther suggested that what I had observed was only in my head. Not likely, I told her. In my thirty-four years, I had prayed in many different Orthodox synagogues and I trusted I had seen correctly. "But you're wrong about observant women and Torah study," she said. She decided to set me straight. She had studied theoretical physics at Stanford after being educated in a women's religious high school in New York and at Stern College. Although she finished her dissertation these last years in between births, she had not yet been employed as a physicist. Her mother was a dentist. Her grandmother had been a principal of a girls' high school. All of them Orthodox women, professionals, mothers, wives. And all learned in Torah.

I didn't know what to think. Either I was profoundly ignorant about the status of women's learning in the observant community, or Esther didn't realize how atypical the women in her family were. The religious communities I knew did not recognize the intellectual

presence of women. They acknowledged our expertise only on matters of procreation, housekeeping, and selfless acts of lovingkindness. Since motherhood was inevitable, all learning was wasted on us. (My upbringing instilled in me a sense that the most important thing I could do at college—and this was in the seventies—was to find a husband. Don't work so hard at Tufts that you miss out on a man headed for orthopedics or a dental subspecialty. If you're smart, you'll be realistic and take steps to secure your future.)

I knew that rabbis sermonizing from their pulpits about our Jewish sages were not referring to co-ed think tanks. Torah sages were the white-bearded wise men, God's fraternity brothers. When rabbis praised the sages' wisdom, they were praising the wisdom of men. That was truth, and there was no way it could be confused with homey maternal instruction. I could hardly believe there was an enlightened enclave in Worcester that produced women so learned in Torah as Esther.

The fact that I came of age as women were becoming business executives and astronauts did not make it any more likely that many women would become learned in Torah, even as foot soldiers, let alone as generals. Not in a thousand years. I knew there were quirky exceptions. In the second century there was a ninety-two-year-old maid in the household of Rabbi Judah who whispered correct scriptural interpretations into the ears of the scholar and his students while she swept, served, and tidied. Also in the second century was Bruria, the wife of Rabbi Meir. In all of the Talmud she is the only woman whose views on legal matters are considered. In the twelfth century, there was the nameless only daughter of Rabbi Samuel ben Ali ha-Levi of Baghdad, expert in Bible and Talmud, who taught Bible to men, but through a window so they could not see her. (According to Judith Baskin, a professor in the Department of Judaic Studies at SUNY Albany, this story, exhibiting the folkloric motif of the veiled woman teaching men, may be apocryphal.) In the nineteenth century in the Ukraine, there was another only daughter,

Hannah Rachel Werbemacher, known as the Maid of Ludomir. She observed men's religious duties, wore their prayer garb, learned mysticism, and built an apartment adjacent to a synagogue, so that on Sabbath afternoons she could open her door to the synagogue and deliver Torah lessons to the Hasidim who revered her. But these women who learned are like dancing bears: aberrations. Possible, yes, but unlikely and dangerous. One never forgets that the dancing bear is a bear, capable of bearish acts, and that is why it wears a muzzle.

Esther asked me, "Do you study Torah?"

She was surely kidding. In Hamilton, New York, I found keeping track of holidays and procuring Hanukkah candles and scouting the region for Passover foods to be challenge enough. It had never troubled me that my religious life lacked an intellectual component. Peter used to lead Sabbath services at the college and he would call on a student to read some of the weekly Torah portion aloud. I don't recall ever being inspired by hearing the biblical narratives or the laws concerning priestly behavior and the varieties of sacrifice. Peter seemed to be in cahoots with Esther. He sometimes nudged me on Sabbath afternoons to join him in study. "Don't you have any desire to study Torah?" he would ask. He asked more insistently after my illnesses started. He was convinced that I could draw strength from shoring up my religious life. I think what he had in mind was for me to believe in and worship God with more enthusiasm. I didn't see how that would work for me.

I would put him off, reaching for the *Times* or a novel, saying I didn't know how to go about studying Torah.

I thought it would be boring. Hebrew school had been horribly tedious. Along with history and language, Torah was just another subject that only minimally engaged me. Our teachers said we should love Torah. They said Torah preceded the creation of the world, that it was written in black fire upon white fire, that it served as God's blueprint for creation, that the world existed for the purpose of receiving its revelation. For me, these were no more than

overblown metaphors: what it boiled down to was that we should revere the Jewish life outlined in Torah and be proud we were Jews. My teachers couldn't have meant we should love studying Torah. In my Hebrew school class, we were timed as we speed-read a page of Bible in Hebrew. The fastest, often me, was rewarded with an after-dinner mint or a handful of Raisinets. Peter, who had done serious Torah study at the Jewish Theological Seminary, offered to teach me Torah on an adult level: to read the Hebrew carefully, to compare the interpretations of the commentators, to recognize the various redactors and note textual emendations. I turned him down after some abortive efforts. I had already tried learning to drive a car from him, and divorce being as commonplace as it was among my friends and family, I believed only a fool would put a solid relationship to extreme tests. I resisted seeing Torah through Peter's eyes. If we ever studied Torah together, it would be when I could hold my own.

The Torah (the word means "teaching") is not just one important Jewish symbol among many. For Orthodox Jews, the Torah is quite literally the word of God as it was given to Moses on Mount Sinai. Each morning a Jew affirms this in prayer: "God gave his people the Torah of Truth, by means of his prophet, the most trusted of his household. God will never emend nor exchange his law for any other one, for all eternity." Jews of other denominations are likely to see the Torah as the testimony of holy men, divinely inspired.

Torah encompasses both the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. The former refers to the five books of the Hebrew Bible, which are written by hand on the parchment of the Torah scroll, as well as to the Prophets and Writings. The latter refers to the interpretations and dialogues of the rabbis that were eventually codified in writing. It is composed of the Mishnah (compiled in written form at the end of the second century and the beginning of the third century) and the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds (compiled in the fifth and sixth centuries, respectively). The Oral Torah is considered the necessary human complement to the Written Torah; it

is believed to be just as holy and just as divinely sanctioned as the Written Torah. Moreover, Oral Torah is a process that continues into the present. The teachings and interpretations of rabbis of each generation are also called Torah. Prolific Judaic scholar Professor Jacob Neusner, visiting member at The Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, describes this process: "Whatever the most recent rabbi is destined to discover through proper exegesis of the tradition is as much a part of the way revealed to Moses as is a sentence of Scripture itself. It therefore is possible to participate even in the giving of the law by appropriate, logical inquiry into the law."*

A Jew's understanding of the nature of God, of how to fulfill God's will, of how to behave and worship, of the past and future history of the universe—all are contained in the Torah. For this reason, it is written in the *Ethics of the Fathers* (5:25): "Delve into it [the Torah] and continue to delve into it for everything is in it; look deeply into it, grow old and gray over it, and do not stir from it, for you can have no better portion than it." Even in death, a Jew retains Torah learning: "When a man departs from this world, neither silver, nor gold, nor precious stones nor pearls escort him, but only Torah study and good deeds" (*Ethics of the Fathers* 6:9). For good reason are Jews called the People of the Book.

Or at least the *Men* of the Book. For while Jewish men have always had opportunities to place the study of Torah at the center of their lives, women were given a back seat. "How do women earn merit?" asks the Babylonian Talmud (*Berakhot* 17a). "By making their children go to the synagogue to learn Scripture, and their husbands to the house of study to learn Mishnah, and by waiting for their husbands until they return from the house of study." I was not surprised to find this model of woman as enabler

*_The Way of Torah: An Introduction to Judaism_ Second Edition (Encino, California: Dickenson Publishing Company, 1974), 43.