

I S S U E S

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IS GOD A CRUTCH?

Many of us who believe in Jesus (especially those of us who are Jewish) hear from our non-believing friends and relatives that he is “only a crutch.” Robert Rosett, a family physician in California, remembers the first time, as a child, that he asked his 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.¹ *(continued inside)*

(continued from cover)

In this edition, you will read the stories of three Jewish women who faced daunting physical, emotional and mental health challenges. They each turned to God, and specifically to Y'shua (Jesus), and found rest and peace in him.

A common assumption is that people with these types of challenges only turn to Y'shua as a "crutch." But, as Bill Withers sang, "We all need somebody to lean on."² Don't we all have our own "crutches," our own way of numbing our wounds, hurts and disappointments? We bury ourselves in our work. We surround ourselves with expensive things. Or we lean on people, only to discover that even our best friends can let us down. While we need to depend on each other, the Hebrew Scriptures speak of "a friend who sticks closer than a brother" (Proverbs 18:24).

Withers concludes his song "Lean on Me" with this thought:

*If there is a load you have to bear
That you can't carry
I'm right up the road
I'll share your load if you just call me.*

That sounds an awful lot like Jesus, who said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

But is God a crutch like the things or people we lean on? Moishe Rosen, the founder of Jews for Jesus, once said, "God is not a crutch. A crutch is a crutch and God is God. To lean on God is not wrong, but he is not a piece of healthcare equipment."

Those who share their stories on these next pages would agree. Their motive was to find the truth. Is their faith just a crutch? You decide.

1. Robert Rosett, "What's a Jewish Atheist to Do?" *ISSUES*, vol. 13, no. 1, http://www.jewsforjesus.org/publications/issues/13_1/jewishatheist
2. Bill Withers, "Lean on Me" (Hollywood, CA: Sussex Records, 1972), <http://www.billwithers.com>

WHAT I THOUGHT WAS ME*

by Sally Klein O'Connor

I was born into a middle class, Jewish-American family, which would have made me a *princess* except my father was a florist, not a doctor. We celebrated the traditional Jewish holidays in a superficial way. While I was taught there was a God, I never really knew him.

For the first few years of my life we lived in Fairfax, a predominantly Jewish neighborhood in Los Angeles. Practically everyone on the block was friendly, like extended family. I remember walking to school with my best friend, holding hands. My father took my brother and me to his mother's Orthodox synagogue on the High Holy Days. My mom rarely attended. She didn't appreciate how the women sat on one side while the men were on the other. I remember apples and honey each year and the rabbi's blessing on Rosh Hashanah, "May your name be inscribed in the Book of Life!"

We moved when I was around eight to a different section of Los Angeles. Before I had a chance to make friends, something happened that changed my life forever. On the way to the school bus stop, I bent down to pet a neighbor's dog and the dog bit my face. It took 100 stitches to close the wound. When I returned to school my classmates gave me a new name—"Scarface." For the next three years I heard Scarface every day—on the school playground and in the neighborhood. After awhile, I believed this must be the truth about me. I became a loner, pushing people away. Long after I stopped hearing the name with my ears, I continued to believe it was who I really was. From then until I turned 27, Scarface shaped and defined me in ways without number.

When my brother died at eighteen from cancer, my parents' marriage fell apart after thirty-plus years, and I was left with a lot of angry questions. I began searching for answers. From Ayn Rand to Zen, I sought truth through pages

*Title of one of Sally's songs. You can learn more about Sally and listen to her music at <http://www.sallykleinoconnor.com>



and people I thought had already found it. But none of their philosophies filled the empty place in my heart.

Two close friends, also Jewish, had become believers in Jesus. One lent me *The Great Divorce*, and the other recommended *Mere*

Christianity. Both books by C.S. Lewis spoke to me in some deep places and impressed me very much. But *Mere Christianity* ignited a question that filled up my heart and mind: *How could there be a God in this cold and infinite universe who could love me?*

I remember reading the conclusion to Lewis' argument for Christianity, that you had to believe in the person of God expressed through Jesus, God's Son. I was so angry I threw the book down and screamed in my heart at the God I didn't believe in. That very night God answered me. I awoke suddenly. My boyfriend, Michael, had stayed over, and was snoring peacefully beside me. But then, without warning, I was completely filled with a love I had never known. Far beyond mere human emotion, it was without any shadow, so pure and holy I was sure nothing within me could produce such a feeling. At that moment I knew that God was touching me. And then, in an instant, it was over.

The next morning I called my best friend, who was also Jewish, and told her what happened. She assured me that it was something from my deep subconscious. But I knew what touched me that night had come from outside of me. I also realized that if I really wanted truth, I had to accept that God had answered my question by revealing himself to me. I could no longer label myself an atheist or agnostic. There was a God.

That God existed and cared for me was one thing—but

Jesus was another. My good friend Ross, who lent me one of the C.S. Lewis books, offered to take me to the Yom Kippur service at Ahavat Zion Messianic Synagogue in Beverly Hills. Barry Budoff was the rabbi. I fasted that day for the first time in many years and spent the morning at the synagogue. I came back for the evening service and to break the fast. Afterwards, Rabbi Barry walked over to talk to me. I was pretty hostile even though God had been dealing with me for several months since that night he touched me. I asked Barry if he had ever seen *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, an old sci-fi movie that portrayed normal people possessed by plant pods from outer space. This was, in fact, my opinion of people who believed in God. They had been taken over by aliens, and had become zombie-like in their religion. Little did I know that Barry was a sci-fi fan. I asked him where he kept his plant pods, and he didn't drop a beat. He said: "I keep them in my office. Would you like to see?" As Ross and I followed Barry to his office, tears were running down Ross's cheeks.

In that office, on the night of Yom Kippur in 1984, I took my first very hesitant steps toward Jesus. Later that night I stood on top of Mulholland Drive, overlooking the lights of the San Fernando Valley, and affirmed to the Lord that I really wanted him in my life and desired to know him more.

Michael and I had been going together for two years. We met in a songwriting class and started collaborating. He wrote positive country songs, while I preferred to express my angst in blues and ballads. I was especially attracted to his red hair and freckles. As time went on we both had a deep desire to write songs that would matter. Little did we know then how God would fulfill that dream.

Michael asked me to marry him a month after I became a believer. I accepted hesitantly, realizing Michael was not interested in knowing more about God. But he agreed to go to a pre-marital class at a nearby church, and that's when things got really tense. I felt guilty that we were not on the same page in what we believed. And I dreaded that without that spiritual unity we would wind up like our parents, separated and divorced. So I finally, tearfully told Michael I couldn't (continued on page 4)



WHAT I THOUGHT WAS ME (continued from page 3)

marry him, that he needed to decide what he believed about Jesus. And if he didn't believe in Jesus, we could still be friends, but I couldn't marry him.

Michael warned me we might never get married, that he would not believe in Jesus for my sake. I told him I didn't want to be with anyone else and I would wait for him. We went to a double feature that night and stuffed ourselves with popcorn. We barely talked and I cried a lot.

True to his word, Michael didn't do it for me. For two years we struggled with our feelings and my faith, but there came a day when Michael knew God was speaking to him and he opened his heart to the Lord.

When I began this strange and wondrous journey, my faith was tentative at best. My heart had been balled up like a fist for years and I wasn't about to surrender the tender parts to One I hardly knew—not even the One I acknowledged as Lord.

But God, with a gentle and merciful hand, began to peel away the layers of skin grown over like scabs on the wounds of my heart. He showed me his scars through the Scriptures, and in the lives of his people. I began to understand the depth of love they signified. His love opened my fists and loosened my heart. As I turned to Jesus and allowed him to touch those raw and tender places, I began to heal.

There are wounds that lay open upon our bodies for everyone to see. In the course of time they close up and become scars. They remain as markers in our lives, but they are healed and no longer painful to touch.

Then there are those hurts that no one can see. Often these take longer to heal. Now, like the physical mark I bear from the dog, there are scars in my heart where once there were wounds. Grace has taken pain's place.

Through Improbable People Ministries, Michael and I have had the privilege of sharing our songs and stories to touch many wounded people in places we could never have imagined. It is our hope that God will continue to use our words and music to "bind up the broken hearted" (Isaiah 61:1) and set the captives free.

*"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."
(2 Corinthians 4:7)*

LIFTING THE DARK CURTAIN

by Carole Cohen

I was born in Chicago, Illinois, on September 23, 1949, to a Jewish mother and gentile father. When I was two, they divorced. My mother, Harriet, was very liberal and not very interested in Judaism. She cooked bacon, ham and sausage. She read the *Bhagavad Gita* and books about Zen Buddhism. We even celebrated Easter and Christmas!

When I was very young, I drew a picture of Jesus on the cross and hung it up in my bedroom. Then when I was seven, my grandmother wanted me to start going to Sunday school at her Reform synagogue to get some Hebrew religious training. I was paranoid that the Sunday school teacher was going to march down the street to my apartment with all the little Jewish kids and rip down the picture! So I took it down!

When I was ten, my mother remarried, this time to a Jewish man, Victor Cohen, and we moved to Maryland. He legally adopted me, and from age ten to seventeen, I was raised in a few different Jewish neighborhoods in Baltimore.

My mother and stepfather had two children together, Larry, in 1961, and Barbara, in 1963.

My stepfather's father was Orthodox and went to *shul* every day. But when Victor married my mother, he didn't remain Orthodox. In fact, they were married in my grandmother's (on my mother's side) Reform temple in Chicago. Victor went along with whatever my mother did. My mother only attended synagogue on the High Holidays, so that's what my stepfather did, although occasionally he went to shul on his own. But my mother and I did stop celebrating Christmas and Easter!

When I turned eleven, my parents sent me to Hebrew school at a Conservative synagogue in Baltimore. I attended until I was *bat mitzvah* at age thirteen. I dropped out after that and only attended synagogue on the High Holidays.

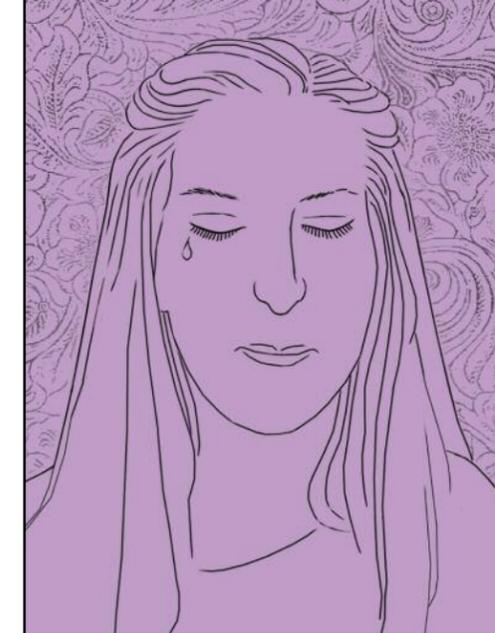
My real spiritual journey—when I was self-motivated to seek out truth—began when I was seventeen. During spring break of my senior year in high school, I read *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse, the story of a Hindu Brahman man who finally finds peace by becoming a river ferryman. I was much impressed by this book.

I decided to do a research project on Buddhism. While doing this project, I was having a hard time at home with my parents. I was very jealous of my stepfather; I thought he took

my place in my mother's affections. I had also broken up with my boyfriend; we had been inseparable, so I had to get to know my parents all over again. I felt so alone and scared. I prayed to God to help me, and I added something like, "I believe in Jesus, too."

Here I was, a senior in high school, with no plans for my future. I called my best friend in Chicago, and she encouraged me to apply to California colleges because I was always talking about how much I wanted to live in California. So I applied to three California colleges.

Although I forgot about my prayer to God, things did get better. I was finally content. I got along with my parents. I loved them and my little brother and sister, too. For the first time in my life, I had self-confidence. I did (continued on back cover)



RENOUNCING THE STIGMA OF MENTAL ILLNESS

"It's said that people with mental illness face a double-edged sword," writes Margarita Tartakovsky. "Not only do they have to contend with serious, disruptive symptoms, they still have to deal with rampant stigma. Sadly, mental illness is still largely shrouded in stereotypes and misunderstanding."¹

But here are the facts, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness²:

- They are disorders of the brain that disrupt a person's thinking, feeling, moods and ability to relate to others. Just as diabetes is a disorder of the pancreas, mental illnesses are brain disorders that often result in a diminished capacity for coping with the ordinary demands of life.
- Mental illnesses are more common than cancer, diabetes or heart disease. Mental illnesses can affect persons of any age, race, religion or income.
- Despite media focus on the exceptions, individuals receiving treatment for schizophrenia are no more prone to

violence than the general public.

- One in five families is affected in their lifetime by a severe mental illness, such as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia or major depression.
- Most importantly, these brain disorders are treatable. Most people with serious mental illness need medication to help control symptoms. Supportive counseling, self-help groups, housing, vocational rehabilitation, income assistance and other community services can also provide support and stability, leaving the focus on recovery.

Not all experts agree with this medical model, that mental illness is solely or necessarily a brain disorder. As John M. Grohol states, "Mental disorders . . . are complex disorders that involve genes, biology, personality, social development, environment, relationships, and a whole lot more in most people."³

But, as in Carole Cohen's case, the proper medication has

often proven effective. For these individuals, it's hard to argue against the medical model.

And for **any** individual who faces the challenges of a mental illness, the last thing he or she needs is the stigma and resulting isolation. It is time to challenge the negative stereotypes that surround people with mental illness and put into practice the words of a famous rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12).

Endnotes

1. Margarita Tartakovsky, M.S., "When Mental Illness Stigma Turns Inward," <http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2011/05/26/when-mental-illness-stigma-turns-inward>
2. "Stigma Attached to Mental Illness," NAMI McHenry County, Illinois, http://sharron_powell.tripod.com/NAMIMC/id20.html
3. John M. Grohol, PSYD, "Mental Disorders are Not Simple 'Brain Illnesses,'" <http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2007/10/26/mental-disorders-are-not-simple-brain-illnesses>

A STEP OF FAITH by Laurie Ornstein

I was born a normal healthy Jewish child on November 17, 1963, in Huntington, New York, the youngest of three daughters. And while my childhood memories include receiving presents on Hanukkah, enjoying *shul* on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and our family *seder* on the first two nights of Pesach, and my *bat mitzvah* when I was thirteen, mine was no ordinary Jewish childhood.

When I was two and a half, I began having spasms and involuntary movements throughout my body. I developed lockjaw, and my body became so contorted that I looked like a pretzel. The progression rapidly continued. Because I could no longer sit or walk, I began lying on the couch all day, every day. I was in a lot of pain.

At age four, I was diagnosed with dystonia, a condition in which the brain sends the wrong messages to the muscles. The doctors told my parents that I would need brain surgery—one operation on my left side and two on my right.

After the first surgery, my entire left side was less spastic, with better muscle control. The surgery on my right side also worked, but my speech was negatively affected because the doctor had to go through the speech center in my brain.

The dystonia also caused my facial muscles to pull my jaw way out of alignment. Only my family, teachers and close friends could understand my speech.

I had jaw reconstruction surgery when I was seventeen. Every bone in my jaw had to be broken and reset. A few days later I looked at myself in a mirror and cried as I saw a smaller, prettier face. Several speech and language pathologists worked with me for many years after my surgery, and my speech slowly but progressively improved.

If that wasn't enough of a challenge, when I was 28, the doctors found a lump in my right breast. It was cancer. Stunned and confused, I went into my room and cried for I don't know how long. "Why, God? Why me? Haven't I been through enough?"

The surgery was performed on September 28, 1993. On October 1, the surgeon's office called and said that everything had worked out perfectly. I cried as I thanked God. I had radiation therapy after the surgery, and I have been cancer free ever since!

Enough with the surgeries for a while. Let me tell you about my spiritual journey.

My father was Orthodox, my mother Reform. Mom did not keep two sets of dishes, so she compromised with Dad and did not bring anything non-kosher into our home. We went to a

Conservative synagogue, South Huntington Jewish Center, because my mom refused to sit behind a *mechitza* (the partition dividing men and women in the Orthodox synagogue). We attended services every week, where

we were blessed to have Rabbi Morris Shapiro for 21 years. He knew the Torah and the Talmud inside out.

When I was a freshman at Hofstra University, a woman named Diane was my aide. (I used a motorized wheelchair, but still needed assistance with many tasks.) All Diane ever talked about was Jesus. I was convinced that she was brainwashed. She would make statements like, "Jesus was born to a virgin" and "Jesus rose from the dead." I asked her, "How can a virgin become pregnant?" or "How can you believe that anyone rose from the dead?" She and her Christian friends had answers for my questions, but my belief in Judaism was extremely strong.

This went on for about a year and a half. I finally decided enough was enough. I hired a different aide and cut off contact with my Christian friends. I was Jewish and I was going to remain Jewish. But I spent the next few years confused. Had I been wrong all my life? Was Jesus the Messiah?

Then in 1994, I met a man who said he was a Christian. After we had known each other for a few months, I asked him, "What kind of Christian are you? Lutheran, Presbyterian?" He replied, "Born again."¹

My friend did not beat me over the head with the Bible or try to convert me. We had great discussions about religion, and I always felt that he respected not only that I was Jewish, but that I was committed to my faith.

Through these discussions and through thinking back on my conversations with Diane and her friends, I came to believe that Jesus had died for my sins and risen from the dead. On April 29, 1995, I asked Jesus to come into my heart. Now I was born again!

I knew I could not tell my parents or anyone else in my family. They would have had a fit, to put it mildly. I knew not to



even bring a New Testament into my parents' home, where I was living. But no one could stop me from praying, and I prayed for Jesus to work out a way that I could find my own apartment so that I could worship him in the way I saw fit.

My prayer was answered, and on Monday, April 1, 1996, I moved into my own apartment!

The following Sunday was Easter Sunday. I called a couple of local churches. The pastor of the second one said he could give me a ride to church that Sunday morning. It did seem a little weird to be sitting in a church. The pastor's message was about Jesus' resurrection power. After the service, the person behind the welcome desk handed me a Bible that contained both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament.

As I read the New Testament, I was surprised to see how Jewish Christianity really is. Growing up in a good Jewish home, I had been taught that Jesus had been Jewish, a rabbi, and that most of the early church had been Jewish. That's where the discussion ended. I was always taught to believe that only gentiles could be Christians.

I wondered how and when I was going to tell my family. Then friends began saying things to me about Jesus in front of my parents.

On July 2, 1996, my father was driving me from my parents' house back to my apartment. "So, Laurie, what's going on with this Jesus stuff?" he asked. I took a deep breath, paused and braced myself for the most difficult sentence I would ever have to speak: "I believe that Jesus is the Son of God."

Those nine words were torturous for me to have to say to him and I'm sure torturous for him to hear. My father and I had words, and I cried uncontrollably. I was hurt for myself and also for my father. He told my mother and she was just as upset.

But about a year after my father confronted me, my parents told me that although they were not pleased with what I had come to believe, they just wanted me to be happy. Since they could see that I was happy, that's all that mattered to them.

Now back to the physical part of me.

I wanted to get better and start walking. I also wanted to be able to take care of myself without needing to rely on other people.

In 2003, my father learned of an operation in which the surgeon would put electrodes in both sides of my brain. Then he would place batteries in my upper chest area and run a wire to connect the electrodes to the batteries. We scheduled the first surgery for October 16 and the second for November 17, which happened to be my 40th birthday.

Both surgeries went well. Afterwards, they programmed the batteries to send messages to the electrodes in my brain.

My brain, in turn, instead of sending the wrong signals to the muscles, now sends the correct ones.

I began to be able to do things I could never do before. I was now able to feed myself using utensils and pick up a cup. As time went on, and by tweaking the batteries, I could do more and more.

I still wanted to walk. But from a very early age my right foot was turned downward and inward. There was no way I could ever walk with my foot in that position.

The third foot surgeon I visited said, "Laurie, I don't know if you'll ever walk again, but if we don't fix your foot you will certainly never walk again." I knew he was the one I wanted.

He performed the surgery on June 2, 2005, and I went into rehab on June 7. My foot was in a cast and I was not allowed to put any weight on it. The therapists worked with me to "hop" while holding onto a walker. They also had me doing exercises to strengthen my stomach muscles.

Every two weeks I went to see the surgeon. He would remove the cast to see how my foot looked. Each time, as the swelling reduced, he would put a new cast on. I couldn't believe what I saw the first time the cast was taken off. A flat, straight foot! I was crying!

On the eighth week, the surgeon told me, "In two weeks I want you to start taking a few steps a day with the right foot." After 38 years of not walking, I was going to walk again!

August 10, 2005. The day had arrived. My whole family was there as well as some close friends and a few of the nurses. They stood me up on a walker with both feet on the floor. I could hardly move but somehow I did. I noticed tears in everyone's eyes. I was all cried out already and that was fine with me.

Although I am still not able to walk without the walker, I'm continuing to believe and pray that some day I will.

Some people have told me I have missed out on what people who can walk have received from life. I bought into that lie for many years until I realized all that I had done.

I graduated from high school in 1981, Hofstra University in 1986, and Teachers College, Columbia University (graduate school) in May 1988. I have had three jobs since then. I have had my own apartment for over fifteen years. Being able to live independently has changed my life enormously.

Even more important was the courage to think independently and consider the question, "Who is Jesus?" and to decide that I, as a Jew, would follow him. He helped me to become an overachiever, so that I would not miss out on the life God has given me. ■

1. The Gospel of John (New Testament), chapter three

LIFTING THE DARK CURTAIN *(continued from page 5)*

better in school. I had a new boyfriend.

Then, about a month and a half later, I was shocked to hear a voice in my head saying I was no longer worthy to enjoy life. I somehow felt I had “sinned,” a term we really didn’t use in Judaism or in my home. It was as if a dark curtain had fallen across my mind. All I could think of was how guilty I was, and I lost all my peace. It turned out that was the beginning of my life-long struggle with mental illness.

I was accepted to the California colleges, and I prepared to go to San Francisco State College. This was in 1967, the infamous “Summer of Love,” when thousands of young people migrated to San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury neighborhood to party and get high on drugs. That’s exactly what I wound up doing. The only reason I got so heavy into drugs was that I wanted to stop thinking about how guilty I felt by “blowing my mind.” In mental health circles this is called “self-medicating.”

As a result of taking drugs, I got a bad case of hepatitis. I took an airplane home to Maryland and was in the hospital for twenty days. When I got back home, I went to our rabbi and asked him how I could be forgiven of my sins. I don’t remember what he said, but I remember that his advice didn’t help me.

Then I started having delusional thoughts. My rabbi referred me to a Jewish social worker, who told me I needed to be hospitalized. So in February 1969, I entered Spring Grove State Hospital, and I was there, mainly in a locked facility, for six very long months. I was told I had paranoid schizophrenia and needed to stay on medications for the rest of my life.

After being discharged in September 1969, I moved to Chicago, to my girlfriend’s parents’ house. I took my medications and didn’t do any drugs. I was still searching spiritually. I read books by Norman Vincent Peale and books about Hinduism. I had a resurgence of interest in Judaism and went to my grandmother’s Reform congregation every Friday night. One day I went to a Catholic church and asked the priest if he could forgive my sins. He asked if I was Catholic. I told him I was Jewish, and he said, “Oh, you must find out if Jesus is your Messiah.” His words stayed with me.

In January 1970 I came back out to California. I went off my meds and got involved in drugs again. One day I met a visiting Indian guru at Stanford University. He gave me a mantra to say. Every day, for half an hour in the morning and half an hour in the afternoon, I meditated in the back yard and said the mantra, over and over, in my head.

Then an odd thing happened. One day when I started to meditate, the picture of a white Bible that someone in Baltimore had given me came into my mind’s eye. This happened several times.

Not long after that, I was sitting on a bench at a nearby park, and a gray-haired woman sat next to me. We had a discussion about God, and Millicent gave me her phone number. She was a Christian, and I wound up living with her and her family. Millicent gave me a pamphlet to read titled, “Rabbi Asher Levy Speaks to this Generation.” It was the story of a rabbi who came to believe that Y’shua (Jesus) is the Jewish Messiah. The pamphlet also contained prophecies from the Hebrew Scriptures concerning the Messiah and the New Testament Scriptures telling how Jesus fulfilled those prophecies. In July 1970 I said a prayer with Millicent, asking Jesus to forgive my sins and come into my heart.

Jesus has been my best friend ever since. I can tell him whatever I’m feeling. Sometimes I do things that people think are a little strange. But I can confide in Jesus about that, and it doesn’t bother me that much, because I know he loves and accepts me.

Medication has helped me, but my relationship with Y’shua has helped me even more. He has given me the determination to work rather than to collect Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), for which I could have qualified. I have worked at various jobs over the years and have been at my current job for fourteen years. I’m a lowly “cashier” (remember Siddhartha and how he became a river ferryman?). But I am at peace now, knowing who is in charge of my life.

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. . . . Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”
(John 14:27) ■