

Growing up in a secular home, my identity as a Jewish female didn't concern me very much. The holidays at my parents' home were mainly occasions for festive meals. We didn't attend synagogue or fast on Yom Kippur. My parents celebrated my bat mitzvah with family and friends, attaching no religious significance. And whereas my two younger brothers learned a haftarah and had an aliyah in a synagogue, I wasn't bothered by this, and didn't feel I was deprived.

The only emotional connection to my identity as a Jewish woman came via the Shoah—when I read Anne Frank's *The Diary of Young Girl*, and other books about children in the Holocaust, I knew that if I had been born in a different place and a different time, my fate would have been the same as their fate, because of my Jewishness. I imagined myself living in the ghetto, in hiding, in a concentration camp. I remember asking myself, do I look Jewish? Would my blue eyes and small pug nose fool the Nazis into thinking I was Aryan, and would I possibly have been saved?

The first time I felt keenly my being a Jewish woman was at my mother's funeral. I was already 27 years old. I stood by the open grave with my two young brothers, and the two of them mumbled the Kaddish prayer, stumbling over the difficult Aramaic words. I remember the pain of my being unable to say Kaddish for my mother. After all, I was her eldest child, and why did the unfair Jewish laws deny me this privilege? I knew that if I read the prayer, I would have done so in a deliberate and clear voice, without mistakes.

It was this pain that I expressed through one of the characters in a play I wrote a few years later. "Dvora Baron," was performed at the Cameri Theater in Tel Aviv in 2000. Thought of as the first female Hebrew writer, Dvora Baron was the daughter of a rabbi from a village in Lithuania and was privileged to obtain from her father a boy's education. She also critiqued Judaism as a feminist early in the 20th century. Before her husband's funeral Dvora is discussing with two good friends which of them will say Kaddish. "He has a daughter," says Tzipora, their daughter, "and I will say Kaddish for Father," And Dvora says bitterly, "You can't say Kaddish, Tziporaleh, not in our religion." When Dvora herself dies, at the end of the play, Tzipora stands at the edge of her bed and says Kaddish for her mother in a loud and clear voice. The play ends with the singing of Kaddish in the beautiful voice of Mirah Zakkai, the wonderful and best known opera singer in Israel. Thus did I compensate myself for not being able to say Kaddish for my mother, and I expressed my protest against the discrimination of women in Orthodox Judaism.

—translated from the Hebrew by ND

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When I Was a Soldier



I remember always having been a little Jewish girl, covering her eyes before the Shabbat candles on Friday night, and knowing her *Ma Nishtana* by heart at the age of three. I remember, more or less, the day I became a woman, but I will not share the details on this subject, and anyway it is not what you have asked me here.

The very expression *Jewish woman* raises so many questions in my mind. My God, how can one define such things? I never had a bat mitzvah. My religious marriage was a very bad idea, followed in its wake by several catastrophic years that culminated a divorce in front of a rabbi with a classic Yiddish accent. Nothing wonderful here that would make me a *Jewish woman*.

The army in Israel, perhaps? During these two years of service I did become an Israeli, I washed a record number of glasses and dishes. I grew, but I wasn't always being a Jewish woman.

And then, suddenly, an epiphany. But yes, of course! I have the date, the hour, and the proof! I know exactly where and when it happened! It was the 18th of August, 1996 in Paris, in the 16th arrondissement. On that day I fell, like a fool, in love with a little man, nearly bald, toothless, who drooled a bit. I thought I had never seen anyone so beautiful. So tender. So attractive. And so intelligent too, of course. I knew that I would spend my life loving him. On that day, in joy and pain, I became a mother. A Jewish mother, of course.

—translated from the French by ND

Valerie Zenatti, author of the memoir, *When I Was a Soldier* (Bloomsbury, 2005) was born in Nice, France in 1970 and made aliyah to Beersheva when she was 13. Now living in Paris, she is a translator, novelist and children's book author.