

I met Barry several years ago in New York City, when my life was in shambles, and he had just divorced. We used to get together once per week as part of a larger support group. Eventually, the group sort of vanished, or maybe it was Barry and I who "graduated," and cut the umbilical cord. One way or another, we ended up leaving the group and trying to rebuild our lives one step at a time.

Those were difficult days, and it was only natural that Barry and I became very close and very good friends. I had finally decided to legally separate from my husband, and he had his own problems related to living in a small apartment while being one of the most responsible dads I've ever seen, despite the challenging circumstances. We were there for each other although not always in person but mostly through the phone (this is what happens when you live in New York... life is so fast and complicated that most of the time two can only connect through a 212.)

Those were also the years when, after much research in archives and other sources, both here and in Spain, I was a 100% positive about my mother's family Crypto Jewish (Sephardic) heritage. For quite some time I had known that there was something different about us, that although I have been brought up as a Catholic (my father's family is a somewhat prominent Catholic family in Spain), something did not fit. I did not fit. And now the wall of silence and fear was finally coming down, and I could actually pinpoint what was "wrong" with me.

Barry was always there to encourage me to pursue my true self as a Jew. He patiently listened to my doubts and tribulations, and tried to assure me that in the eyes of G-d I was no different from any other Jew, whether by birth or by conversion or by heritage.

He was also the person who invited me to my first Passover Seder. No matter how many years I may live, or how many Sedarim I may host in the future, I would never have one like that of 2005, because for the first time in my life I truly understood what it is to lead a Jewish life and to belong to this extraordinary people in this extraordinary times. The joy, the awe, the respect I felt that evening as the Seder evolved before my eyes and my heart can never be replicated... it's a unique experience that I entirely owe to him, and *for that I will always be grateful.*

But Barry has touched my life in more than one way. These past 18 months, life has been a true test for me, particularly on the health front. Some unfortunate events prevented me from attending what would have been my "first Bar Mitzvah"... that of Barry's eldest son, with whom I also enjoyed that beautiful Seder five years ago. I tried my best to be healthy and ready by November, so that my doctors would allow me to fly to New York City and be with them. But for some reason, G-d had other plans for me, and I still had to remain in the hospital for a few more weeks... maybe my first bar mitzvah was not meant to be or maybe is meant to be a bat mitzvah... mine!

I know that all this time Barry has been praying for me, and I know for a fact his prayers and positive thoughts -- much in line with the spirit of that first Passover Seder-- have enormously contributed to my recovery. *For that, I will always be grateful too.*

I hope no matter the years, the countries, the circumstances, or whatever life may throw at us, I would always be able to say with pride and joy that G-d has blessed me by putting such a beautiful person, Barry, in my life as a very close and true friend who opened the door for me to experience for the first time what it is like to feel welcome as a Jew among Jews. *And for that, I will always be more than grateful as well.*

Yom Huledet Same'ach, Barry!

Elohim yevarekh otkha,

A.