



## The Oregon Tale: Jewish Life at the Cutting Edge

**By Vanessa L. Ochs**

Every time I return home from traveling for work, my mother, a woman who has lived her whole life in the New York/New Jersey area, calls to see if I got back okay.

She says, "You were WHERE?" I tell her once again. She says, "There are Jews THERE?" I remind her that I work for CLAL, and that the places I go to teach do, indeed, have Jews. I feel like an old-fashioned explorer of undiscovered tribes when she grills me: "What do they look like? Do they talk like us?"

So I'll tell you what I told my mother about the tribe of Jews in Portland, Oregon, because they had so much to teach me. There is a JCC in Portland, and when you walk in, there is a Judaica gift shop, but not like the synagogue kind that's behind a locked glass window. There's stuff all over, like a shuk, cheap holiday stuff on sale, seriously good Judaic art work, Jewish cards, books, jewelry and artful ritual objects from Israel. There were enough evil-eye key chains, home-protector amulets and "Baruch Ha'Car" mezuzahs to keep this collector of such stuff most intrigued.

Take a few steps, and there are cozy chairs, and in them are some old folks talking, checking in with each other. A few more steps, and there's a kosher deli, with a hearty slab of Hebrew National kosher pastrami smack up against the glass counter, as if to say, "Trust me: this is the real thing." A few more steps and I'm at the swimming pool, where I see grown-ups of many ages swimming. There's a group of kids from the day school getting ready to swim, too, and just behind, the best hydrotherapy pool in town.

A few more turns, and I'm in the day school. It's a community Jewish day school, which means if you belong to the JCC (and anyone can), you can send your kid there. Does it mean that there are kids enrolled who may not be Jewish according to your denomination's criteria? You bet: There are kids enrolled who are not Jewish by anyone's criteria. One teacher told me that when she was introducing her students to the history of anti-Semitism, one non-Jewish child said, "That's terrible! How could that have happened? We must never let that happen again!" When I asked if the non-Jewish children get so excited by Judaism that they "want in" (I imagined bar and bat mitzvahs must look especially appealing), I was told that kids do want to convert, and their parents do, too, and some have. Sometimes the kids from the school pray together with the old folks who come to the JCC: imagine-foster bubbes and zaydes for everyone.

And that, I told my mother, was just the JCC. There was also an office/studio building downtown in the cool "Pearl" district. In the lobby there was one plaque on the wall with Dorothy's wise statement, "There's no place like home," and beneath it another plaque saying, "Next year in Jerusalem." There was the studio of Sara Harwin, who was making elegant ritual objects for Jewish women; there was a group of 18 Jewish women who have been singing together for simchas for 13 years now; there was a young man who was working on the part of his wimpel which he would tie around the Torah at his bar mitzvah; there was a family that had held a chuppa party, so that people they loved could sew 613 beads on the quilted cloth they would hold at their daughter's wedding....

I know it's a habit for those of us who come from the Northeast to be astonished when we learn it's possible to be Jewish anywhere else, except, maybe, for Israel. I know it's a habit for us all to worry about the survival of Judaism. But as I told my mother the story of the Jewish tribe in Portland, it struck me that just as we send our kids to Israel to be astonished by a land that is vibrantly Jewish, we might also send ourselves to those places in our own country where Judaism is vibrant, alive, and deeply traditional, in a cutting edge way.

