Generation J, by Lisa Schiffman

reviewed by Lauren F. Winner in the October 6, 1999 issue

Lisa Schiffman's spiritual quest culminates in a tattoo, inked into her shoulder blade, of a leafy vine running through a Star of David. That the body art was part of preparing for her nude participation in the pagan wedding of her Jewish friend does not, in Schiffman's estimation, undercut the tattoo's meaning. It marks the ways in which her spiritual quest has changed her: "Somehow, I've learned the thing that matters. In the years that have passed since I began my journey into Judaism, I've changed. I've become Jewish by choice as much as by birth."

But the spiritual transformation Schiffman has undergone, detailed in her memoir, is as fleeting as the tattoo, which is made not from permanent ink but henna. It will fade away in weeks.

Generation J is an account of Schiffman's Jewish "wayfinding." Part of the generation of Jews for whom "assimilation wasn't something we strove for; it was the condition into which we were born," Schiffman grew up thinking of being Jewish as "an activity: Today I'll be Jewish. Tomorrow I'll play tennis."

In her early 30s, transplanted from Levittown, New York, to California, Schiffman decided it was time to find out "who we are as Jews." "We" is Generation J—Jews "caught between a desire to believe in religion and a personal history of skepticism," Jews investigating wicca, sitting zazen, burning sage sticks, or setting a menorah next to a jade carving of the Buddha on the bookshelf.

I am part of Generation J, too. Having taken up Jewish feminism, Jewish meditation and, finally, Jewish orthodoxy, I finally left it all to follow Christ. But even having knelt at the foot of the cross, I find myself, like Schiffman, stuck with Judaism, still trying to figure out what it means to catch myself humming Hasidic niggunim as I drive to church.

Schiffman's question—what it means to be part of this "generation of fragmented Jews"—is a good one, but her answers are as superficial as the culture that created her. She tries out one Jewish practice after another, jots some notes about how she feels, and thinks she has done Judaism justice. Her musings are eminently

predictable: She is troubled that her goyische husband does not know to order a pastrami sandwich at their local Jewish deli, instead selecting garlic-stuffed sausage from the menu. She attends a gay pride parade and concludes that Jews need to reclaim the labels the world has hurled at them: Jew. Yid. Kike.

The first trip to the mikvah has become something of a sine qua non in Jewish women's memoirs. Elizabeth Erlich wrote about it in *Miriam's Kitchen*, Lis Harris wrote about it in *Holy Days*, and Schiffman writes about it too. It is, by now, a cliché: Jewish feminist feels uncomfortably compelled to take a dive into the ritual bath, visited monthly by orthodox women seven days after their period ends. A kindly but terrifying mikvah-lady with a thick accent from Eastern Europe shepherds the novice through the process, reminding her to remove all nail polish, scrub loose calluses off her heels, carefully comb her pubic hair to check for nits. Schiffman's realization, en route to her second mikvah dip, seems unconvincing, a manufactured epiphany: "I suddenly understood. My holy moment, the holy moments of other Jewish women—there were millions—every single holy moment was contained there, in the tiles, in the nail clippers and sponges even, in the living waters. And when I entered those waters, every holy moment, every woman's prayers, were touching me."

Most disturbing is a chapter on "Judaism: The Brand," in which she tries to cram Judaism into the advertising culture that surrounds us all. Pondering Judaism and brand loyalty, Schiffman wonders "If Nike's tagline was Just Do It, then what was Judaism's? The Chosen Ones? I cringed. We could do better." So Schiffman dreams up knockoffs of famous slogans. Microsoft's "Where do you want to go today?" becomes a picture of three matzah balls swimming in broth: "What do you want to eat today?" Apple's "Think different" becomes "Pray different" framing pictures of Freud and Gilda Radner instead of Gandhi and Lucille Ball. Altoid's "Curiously Strong Mints" campaign—a photo of a brawny man with a perfect six-pack lifting an Altoid tin—becomes Alan Greenspan and Golda Meir flexing their biceps proclaiming "Jews. A Curiously Strong People." And Nike? Just Jew It, of course.

Schiffman couches everything in slogans. Her favorite construction is a variation of "It's a black thing"—as in "It's an assimilated Jewish thing" (pork), or "It was a geographical thing" (exile), or "It was a water thing" (the mikvah). Instead of submitting herself to the discipline of Judaism, she engages in a kind of voyeurism. She flirts. She does not spend a year in Jerusalem studying Talmud; she does not begin to keep a kosher kitchen; she does not undertake the discipline of daily prayer. Instead, focusing on Judaism as a product to be marketed, she makes

gestures toward exploring her religion without straying too far from the consumerist culture from which she started.