

Rabbi Sofia Zway

A *tallit* led me to fall in love with Judaism. I was fifteen years old and a first-time camper at Netzer South Africa's summer camp in Cape Town. It had taken my sister weeks of persuasion to get me there, but as soon as I stepped foot on the campsite, I knew I belonged. One day, we gathered on the grass outside under the shade of a big tree to learn more about *tallit* and *tzitzit* with Rabbi Greg Alexander and Andrea Kuti. We tie-dyed a large piece of material, and then, after learning about the laws and symbolism of *tzitzit*, we wrapped ritual fringes around the four corners of the tie-dyed cloth. In the span of two hours, a square of fabric was transformed into a *tallit*; 16 threads were transformed into 613 commandments. Little did I know that those fringes would become the compass point for my Jewish journey.

וְהִבִּיאֵנוּ לְשָׁלוֹם מֵאַרְבַּע כַּנְפוֹת הָאָרֶץ

Gather us in peace from the four corners of the world.¹

My Jewish journey took me from a secular home in Ecuador to a Reform summer camp in Cape Town to a gap year in Israel to a rabbinical school in the United States. I have found community in the four corners of the world, and now, as I enter the rabbinate, I hope to bring these corners together. My identity as a woman and as a South African informs my approach to community building. For generations, women and other marginalised groups have been relegated to the margins, or corners, of the Jewish community. These voices deserve to be heard. These stories deserve to be shared. These experiences deserve to be elevated. These are the many threads that make up the fabric of the Jewish community, and enrich and enliven our tradition in profound ways. As a South African who has spent significant time living in and serving communities in South Africa, Israel and America, I see the value in building community across borders. There is so much that we can learn from one another. I envision a Jewish future in which we share ideas and resources; a Jewish future in which we come together from the four corners of the earth to dream and to build a better world.

וְהָיָה לְכֶם לְצִיצֵת וּרְאִיתֶם אֹתוֹ וַיִּזְכַּרְתֶּם אֶת־כָּל־מִצְוֹת יְהוָה וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם

That shall be your fringe; look at it and recall all the commandments of Adonai and observe them.²

In the summer of 2016, I spent six weeks at the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem studying and praying with a diverse group of Jews. At the time, Conservative Judaism was very foreign to me, but I

¹ Ahava Rabbah
² Numbers 15:39

committed to immersing myself in the experience. Ironically, as I lived like a Conservative Jew for six weeks, the experience affirmed for me that I am a proud Reform Jew. In a movement committed to the principle of informed decision-making, I committed myself to “infrummed”³ decision-making by taking on ritual mitzvot that had not been a part of my life before: kashrut, tefillin, blessings, a Shabbat practice. I love this idea that we can be frum (religious) Reform Jews as we make informed choices that bring us closer to the mitzvot and help us connect to the tradition. We are “religious” Jews as we choose to define it, and we should not be afraid of using the richness of our mitzvot, rituals and tradition to fulfill Reform Judaism’s commitment to justice and Tikkun Olam. For it is ritual that connects us to God, to one another and to our tradition. It matters to me that the mitzvot to which I have committed connect me to other Jews and to generations of Jews who came before me. And while Reform Jews are not obligated by *halacha* (Jewish law), I believe that we can choose to bind ourselves to it. The rich history of our movement shows me that we also choose to define and renew our tradition through ritual innovation. Let’s continue drawing on our rich heritage to create new rituals and liturgies that can bring us together as we give voice to and make meaning of the many transitions and transformations that constitute our lives as Jews in the 21st century.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְהִתְעַטֵּף בְּצִיצִית:

Blessed are You, Eternal God, Source of Life, who has made me holy with Your commandments and commanded me to wrap myself in the threads of community and ritual.

As a child, I never imagined that I would one day become a rabbi. And on that sunny December morning in Cape Town, as I looked down at my hand-made *tallit* and wondered: “When will I ever wear this?” I never believed that the answer would become “every day.” I returned home from camp determined to celebrate my bat mitzvah. A year later, I wrapped myself in my new *tallit* for the first time as I embraced my newfound community and the vibrant, dynamic, engaging and loving Judaism that had embraced me.

³ Frum, Yiddish: ‘religious’ or ‘pious’