

**Stories from the Forgotten Corners of the World**

Shabbat Shalom and thank all of you for coming this afternoon. It's so wonderful to see so many familiar faces. First of all I'd like to thank Rabbi Fel and Rabbi Lerner for inviting me to speak today.

So let's take a trip back together to freshman English class, when they talk about the number one rule of writing. Does anyone know what that is?

The number one rule of writing is to write what you know.

Here's the situation. I'm Jewish, and I live in Tel Aviv, which is the Middle East. And somehow, despite not being located in Africa nor being Catholic, I'm an African Nun Correspondent.

After four years working as the Jerusalem beat reporter at the Jerusalem Post, I quit my job last March and traveled around the world for a year. When I returned to Israel, I started looking for a job. I got an apartment only a five-minute walk from the Mediterranean Sea, and decided this would be a great opportunity to learn to surf. But Melanie, I told myself, you can't buy a surfboard until you get a job. So, I thought to myself, perhaps I'll freelance. Well, what's going on in Israel? This was in May, when you actually had to ask yourself what in Israel could be interesting for an international audience. The pope's visit! Perfect. I googled "USA Catholic Newspapers," sent off a few emails to editors, and then I went out and bought the surfboard anyways. When I got back, I had an email from the National Catholic Reporter that their Pope reporter had just come down with pneumonia and they were desperate for someone to cover the Pope's visit in Israel.

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Sometimes the Lord works in mysterious ways, eh? After the pope's visit, I continued freelancing for them by going undercover to investigate sketchy fundraising practices for a group of priests that is going bankrupt in the US but building a luxury hotel in Israel, basically like a Catholic James Bond, and then I pitched a story about the religious life of African migrants in south Tel Aviv. Instead of writing about Africans in Israel, how about you go to Africa and write about nuns? They asked me. We just started a new website about nuns, and we're looking for writers.

I now work half-time at two online publications. I am the religion and environment reporter at the Times of Israel, and I am the Africa Correspondent for a website called Global Sisters Report, which is all about nuns, all the time.

I want to talk today about reporting stories about "the other." The idea of being strangers in a strange land is a very Jewish experience. Even in next week's parsha, we see Abraham navigating this challenge as he negotiates a business deal to purchase the land for Sarah's tomb.

When you report on an unfamiliar topic, you see things with fresh eyes. Everything for me in the world of nuns is new, different, unfamiliar. I am not embarrassed to ask questions, because I have the ultimate excuse. Don't blame the Sunday school catechism teacher, I tell them, I went to Prozdor.

When I write about Jewish issues in my work covering religion for the Times of Israel, I don't have the luxury of this neutrality. There are things in Judaism that make me very angry, including women's rights, and pretty much anything remotely related to the rabbinut. So it's hard to maintain that neutrality when I write about, for example, an initiative to have democratic elections for city rabbis.

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Certainly there are things that make me angry about the Catholic Church, but it's not my church, so I take them less personally. I can maintain my distance in a way that was impossible to maintain distance when I wrote about Jerusalem for the Jerusalem Post.

When Global Sisters Report asked me to be on staff, I kept emailing my editor. "Are you SURE you want ME?" I kept asking her. "Don't you know that I'm Jewish?" But I think that's exactly what they were looking for. What I bring to the table is an unbiased, unfiltered look at the lives of women religious in Africa.

So let's talk a bit about the nuns in Africa. First of all, we don't actually call them nuns. Nuns really refers to women religious who live a cloistered life of prayer in convents and do not interact with the community. Women religious who are out and about, serving as doctors, social workers, teachers, and pharmacists are called "sisters." Doctors? Pharmacists? Yes, sisters are all those things, as well as engineers, accountants, farmers, journalists, scientists, and many more things. The first sister I really met is Joyce Meyers, who was previously a CEO of the Hilton Fund for Sisters, who are the donors supporting the Global Sisters Report website. But I met her as a former CEO, and just assumed that sisters aren't CEOs. That's incorrect. Sisters are encouraged to have careers where they will excel. Often times when I'm in an administrative meeting with sisters, I am the least educated person in the room. Sisters in leadership positions in their congregations often have multiple masters degrees or PhDs.

Development workers simplify the world into two halves. There's the Global North, including North America and Europe. And then there's the Global South, with areas like South America, Asia, and Africa, which are still struggling with development.

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The Catholic Church, like many international religions, spans both of these worlds. But previously, it was always missionaries coming from the Global North to proselytize and recruit members in the Global South. But now, membership and support are declining for the Catholic Church in the Global North, while in the Global South, Christianity is growing stronger than ever. In the USA, there were only 107 new sisters and priests entering religious life in 2013. In Nigeria, I went to a formation school, where one single congregation just in Nigeria had over 50 sisters entering religious life last year.

What this means for the Catholic Church is that in the future, more and more of their religious leaders will be coming from places like Nigeria and Uganda. We are not so far away from an African-born pope. The seat of power for the Catholic Church, by force of sheer numbers, is shifting to the Global South.

The website I work for, Global Sisters Report, is trying to build a bridge of understanding between the Global North and the Global South. We have a few goals: engagement, helping sisters around the world learn about challenges and successes sisters have faced in other countries, to help them improve their own congregations. And also, to explain to people in the global north – what exactly do sisters in Africa or Asia do? Maybe you don't see that many sisters in your own towns, but that doesn't mean that the numbers of sisters are declining everywhere.

And sisters, believe me, are everywhere. They are in every corner of the world, providing services like schools, hospitals, clinics, and vocational training to places where the government can never dream of providing services. Unlike international NGOs that helicopter in from the

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Global North, these are indigenous groups of local women who are empowering themselves with education to provide much-needed support for the communities they serve.

They have clinics in the most remote corners of Africa, they run schools deep in the jungles. They provide orphans with a home and a hot meal, and help young mothers create handicrafts to support their families. The Church hierarchy is not perfect, as we in Boston are well aware with the abuse scandal. As an outsider, I always thought that the Church and the nuns came together as a package deal. But this is not true. Sisters are often much more liberal than the Church. In the US, some sisters provide ministry to gay and lesbian populations way back in the 1960s. In Africa, some sisters, not all but some, even talk quietly about contraception and condoms. So these sisters are an important step towards developing the poorest, most underrepresented groups in the poorest countries. The sisters themselves have so few resources and yet they are able to do so much. And because they're local, they're not going anywhere.

I interviewed sisters in Liberia, who were able to keep 12 of the 17 Catholic hospitals open during the beginning of the Ebola crisis, when the entire Liberian health system just collapsed. Why were they so effective, when government and private hospitals were quickly shuttered? Bernadine Sisters in Liberia, reached out to their congregation in Reading, Pennsylvania, about the dire need for things like bleach, gloves, and PPEs (personal protective equipment). The sisters in the US scrambled to get an entire container full of medical supplies on the way to Liberia just as the crisis was reaching epic proportions. We were already here, and we already had a network of connections, so we could start working immediately, Sister Barbara Brilliant told me via Skype.

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In Nigeria, I visited a clinic deep in the bush, with no paved roads or electricity or running water. When all the parents pay the school fees, the sisters can buy gasoline for their motorcycle so they can reach further corners of the village. Imagine the scene: four sisters wearing immaculate periwinkle habits tearing down red muddy roads on a beat up motorcycle. When they don't have money for gas, which is often, they walk. When they do housecalls at night, they bring a kerosene lamp that looks straight out of Charles Dickens novel so they can help women give birth in their mud-brick huts.

In northern Uganda, sisters are spearheading reconciliation efforts with children abducted by Joseph Kony to carry out massacres against their own villages in a two-decade long civil war. The children were brainwashed and forced to fight in the Lord's Resistance Army, which is responsible for over 100,000 deaths in northern Uganda. The children, now teenagers, are escaping from the Lord's Resistance Army and want to come home, but the communities are still seething with anger and pain. And few of the traumatized returning soldiers have any education. So sisters are at the forefront of blending traditional African forgiveness ceremonies for public reconciliation with education initiatives to help the returning child soldiers find employment and a way to move on. These children are both victims and perpetrators, and figuring out a way to move forward requires tact and spiritual strength.

My travels for Global Sisters Report have also enabled me to visit Jewish communities in far-flung regions, like the Abayudaya Jews of Uganda. I spent Simchat Torah with the Abayudaya Jews, and many times I would stand in services, holding a well-worn blue Sim Shalom prayerbook, close my eyes and listen to the familiar tunes for Ashrei, and feel like I was back in Temple Emunah. They have their own challenges of embracing Conservative Judaism in order to

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gain recognition in the wider Jewish world, while maintaining unique aspects of their Abuyadaya identity.

I want to end with a short reference to next week's parsha of Haye Sarah. It says in the commentary that Abraham's servant, in his quest to bring back a wife for Isaac, went first to the water well, because public wells served as a meeting place for townsfolk and shepherds, and newly arrived strangers could restock their water supplies, gather information about the town, and make useful contacts there. I see this in evidence in Africa, where the wells are often places for meeting locals and catching up on gossip, as well as making contacts for my stories.

Here in Lexington, we no longer have wells, but we have the internet – a communal place where we can exchange news and learn things about far-flung corners of the world. So I invite you to take advantage of this by going online and reading things outside of your comfort zone. Be a stranger in a strange land, even just virtually. Find articles in subjects you know nothing about, in areas you see with fresh eyes, and expand your mind. Selfishly I'll nudge you in the direction of [globalsistersreport.org](http://globalsistersreport.org), but I also urge you to read similar websites from the Baha'i faith, or Hinduism, or Islam.

You can listen to that freshman English teacher. When you write, write what you know, unless the Hilton family is paying to send you to Africa. But when you read, read what you don't know, because it will only open your eyes to new possibilities.

Thank you and Shabbat shalom.