

Taking Leaps into the Unknown in Midlife

By Sandra E. Rapoport

For the past several years, about the time we read *parashat Lekh Lekha*, I have found myself remembering, briefly, “Sandra’s Big Adventure.” No, I did not go to live on a kibbutz for six months, or go on a “walkabout” in the red heart of Australia—not that I haven’t considered those as things I might one day like to do. Rather, I think about my semester as a resident scholar at Harvard.

So what? You might well sniff. But it was truly a “so what” of immense proportion for me. You see, the day I got the call from Harvard, I was nearing my fifty-ninth birthday. That’s a bit old to consider going away to college. I was living with my husband in New York City, the kids were grown and out of the house, and I was engrossed in writing my third book—my first solo venture.

I recognized the 617 area code on the screen of my cell phone. I remember odd things about those few moments: the way the August sun slanted into the room highlighting the dust on my computer screen, and the thought that I had better press “save” before answering the phone. Then all extraneous thoughts fled as I registered what the master of Lowell House at Harvard University was saying. *They remembered my lecture of the previous year on the Matriarch Sarah at the Harvard Faith and Life Forum; they had attended the interactive Passover Seder I organized and ran at Harvard this past spring; they were excited that I was an attorney who also had authored books on women in the Hebrew Bible. Did I recall they had mentioned the possibility of a resident scholar spot sometime in the future? A place had just become available; was I interested in taking the spot? They needed an answer immediately.*



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I tried to process what I was hearing. I was being offered the spot of resident scholar at Harvard for the imminent fall term. I would have to live on campus in Cambridge, in Lowell House (hence the term “resident scholar”) alongside 400 undergraduates, dine with them, befriend them, teach them, mentor them. I was someone with “valuable career and life experiences” to model and share.

Could I take a day to think about this and get back to you?

I realized, after I hung up, that I would never be given a second chance. Either I accepted the offer or I would forever wonder and regret what I had passed up.

I opened a new file and started making lists. At the

top of the page the cursor blinked alongside the one word that could make or break my decision: the name of my husband of thirty-seven years. You see, the *sine qua non*—the nonnegotiable requirement—of a resident scholar was that I move into resident housing and live at Harvard for the entire semester. How could I take this position and leave my husband alone in New York City for months? He was a grown man, I rationalized; he had his absorbing work as a physician, spending sixteen hours a day seeing patients and teaching, and wouldn’t miss me. But, of course, there was much more to it. Throughout

the four decades of our married life we had never been apart for such a long stretch of time. The rhythm of our life was set, and we both relied on this steadiness. In this lovely hiatus when our children were semi-self-sufficient and living elsewhere, dare I shake up our lives so precipitously? I fretted.

Wouldn’t my husband be lonely if I were to leave him for a semester? We had been a “modern couple” back in the 1970s, but forty-odd years later we were more set in our ways. Women of my age and marital situation simply did not do this, did they? Could I? I had no blueprint.

That night, when my husband came home, I dropped “the H-bomb,” as I privately called my pending offer. I watched his face as he processed it. He smiled mischievously, and said the sweetest thing. “It’s a good thing I didn’t trade in the Suburban for a smaller car. This way I can drive you up to college!” He had no doubts. He was already thinking about how to get me and my computer, my books, clothes, and bedding up to Cambridge.

The next day I accepted the position.

In the few weeks between my acceptance and my start date, I sent an e-mail to my friends, letting them know where I would be from September through December. Almost everyone, knowing and loving me, gloried in the “crazy” thing I was doing. They had confidence I would make it work. But a few women acquaintances were outspoken in their disapproval. I was blindsided, stunned, and hurt by the few e-mails I received from Orthodox women with Ph.D.s saying they disapproved of my taking a position in Boston, leaving my husband in New York. One confessed that she would never have the nerve to do what I had done, leaving her husband—even temporarily—to follow her dream. They asked, in word and by implication, whether it was selfish of me, and neglectful of my husband, to do this. In essence, they said that I was altering, *de facto*, my marital agreement. It was one thing, apparently, for young women of today, in their twenties and thirties, to marry and then temporarily pursue their careers in separate cities from their husbands. But it was quite another thing for an older gal like me to decamp from New York City to

Harvard's dorms. What was I playing at?

I agonized. I had taken small risks at every stage of my career, moving from one type of work to another, always after discussing the pros and cons with my husband. I had given up the go-go life of litigating in a law firm to be a management consultant in order to be home for dinner. I had switched to full-time child-rearing, then to studying Torah and writing books on Bible and Midrash. I asked myself if I could do this new and—even by my personal, zig-zag career standards—unconventional thing.

Move-in day came. I unpacked my books in my rooms on the third floor of Lowell House while my husband vacuumed. He stayed over the first night, then drove back alone to New York.

I met with the house masters at Lowell House. I arranged to give a semester-long series of lectures on Women in the Hebrew Bible. I was instantly absorbed into house life. I attended candelabra-lit “high table” dinners, wearing a black dress and pearls, and I appeared at all meals, sharing a table with undergraduates. My classes, composed of Christians, Jews, and a smattering of Muslims, were full. I realized that while my teaching legitimized me, it was the extra-curricular activities that made me one of them. I was expected to sing at the bi-annual house talent show (I did), appear at Senior Common Room lunches every Wednesday, participate in Lowell House teas every Thursday at 5 PM, and attend the Lowell House Opera. The students invited me to their classes (I reread *Wuthering Heights* one Shabbat in preparation for the Monday class), their football games, their study breaks. I took them out to lunch, answered questions about their relationships, their career choices, my kids, my husband, my hair, my new book, my dual life.

I met with the wife of the Hillel rabbi, a powerhouse of a young woman in charge of organizing the Harvard Hillel guest speakers. She was commuting to NYU pursuing her Ph.D. in Judaic Studies. She was also very pregnant. She liked my idea of teaching Wednesday evening Torah Roundtables, and was eager to announce my classes on the Hillel listserv, reaching out to undergrads, graduate students, and the greater Cambridge community. She clued me in to the cheapest commuter bus schedule between Cambridge and New York City, and I gave her thesis-writing advice.

My son coached me, long-distance, on how to connect my laptop to the Harvard server. I slowly learned how to use the Widener Library, and walked the stacks of the Judaica section breathing in articles I could access nowhere else.

My husband came up on the weekends he was not on call. We had Shabbat meals with students, watched the Head of the Charles Regatta, reminisced about our undergraduate years, and felt young and happy. I introduced him to my new friends. We Skyped when he got home so he would have company as he ate his lonely dinners. I learned to sleep with my cell phone under my pillow so I would hear the ring when my daughter phoned from Israel. My kids couldn't get over the fact that their mother was at college. My daughter quipped,

“Hey, Mom, no sooner do you finish with your own kids, than you adopt twenty-five new ones!” She wasn't wrong.

I traveled back and forth to New York several times to be with my husband and to teach an evening class I had committed to before receiving the Harvard offer. I felt like a visitor in my own home. My world had tilted, and I found myself thinking of my other desk, my work, my Lowell House “kids.”

The semester sped by, and Hanukkah arrived at Harvard. I had brought along an electric menorah and set it up in the bay window of my sitting room. No candles were permitted in the house, so this was the best I could do. That is, until I received the e-mail summons from the house master: “Sandra, could you light the Hanukkah menorah at the masters' residence after tea tonight, and lead us all in blessings and songs?” I prepared 50 song sheets: *Ma'oz Tsur* in Hebrew and in transliteration, and “Rock of Ages” in English. I placed the masters' small menorah in the recessed window ledge of their large living room, lit the candles, sang the blessings, and couldn't stop smiling. I added the *berakhah* of *Shehecheiyanu*. *Pirsumei nissa*—publicizing the miracle of Hanukkah—was not just theoretical for me that winter.

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I stuck to my schedule and finished writing my book. I began repacking the cartons I had unpacked—was it a semester ago? I sponsored a farewell open house and invited all my Lowell House friends. With the promise of vegetarian pizza, everyone came and signed my guest book: house masters, tutors, their very small children up past their bedtimes, and my undergraduates. There were tulips and photos, and one young math professor uncovered the grand piano and began to play. They presented me with an official Lowell House fleece. They invited me back for a book party at the Harvard Book Store when my book came out. They wondered why I couldn't stay for the spring semester, too.

I couldn't sleep my last night at Lowell House. My husband was so glad to be taking me home that I knew he would arrive before breakfast. He was done being lonely. I watched the sun come up over the gabled roofs of the quadrangle. I recited my morning prayers and added a special thank-you for the gift of the choice to fulfill a dream I never even knew I was harboring. I had taken a risky leap into the unknown in midlife—my very own *lekh lekha*—and had an unforgettable time.

Sandra E. Rapoport is the author of the award-winning book Biblical Seductions: Six Stories Retold Based on Talmud and Midrash (2011). Visit her website at biblicalseductions.com.