

Journey to the land of My Soul
Ahuvah Gray

*A convert's spiritual journey to the Holy Land which
ultimately becomes her home*

Dveikus Press

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DEDICATION



I dedicate this book in loving memory of my eldest brother, Oscar Lamar Gray. He was a loving husband, a dedicated father, grandfather, and great grand father. May his soul rest in peace!!

A Tribute to Oscar Lamar Gray

I thank God for my family legacy and especially for the wonderful years that He blessed us with our older brother, Oscar Lamar. In my humble opinion he was a man of integrity, and was loved dearly by everyone that was acquainted with him.

While he was living with our paternal grandparents in Mississippi, he attended Mound Bayou High School. He was very successful there and became an instant super star in basketball. Even though he had been offered several scholarships from various southern universities to join their basketball teams, he preferred to join the army and serve as a soldier in the Korean conflict. He felt it more of an honor to defend his country than to become a part of a championship team.

After returning home to Chicago he married, Dorothy Johnson, and they had one daughter, Debra. My brother worked at General Electric for several years and afterwards he became a deputy sheriff until he retired.

Oscar Lamar passed away September 6, 2009; he will be greatly missed by all of us. When I viewed his body on September 14th truly I could see that he was at peace with himself as well as with his Maker.

My brother was buried on the Jewish holiday of Rosh Hashanah. In my opinion he couldn't have been buried on a more auspicious day than this holy day. In Judaism it is taught that all mankind passes before God as sheep on Rosh Hashanah and that all the people are judged. We the Jewish people honor God as our King and we are his servants.

My brother was a servant of God through his life and deeds. Even though I will miss him dearly I am not saddened but honored that he was buried on such an awesome day.

I have nothing but fond memories of him as a protective loving brother and will remember him as the best looking and best dressed young man in the neighborhood.

One of the people at the funeral read out the words I had written beforehand. These included:

My prayer for each of you present at his funeral today is that you will be able to release Oscar in love and go on with your lives and be happy, because this is exactly what he would desire for each of us; to live in peace and happiness.

May God bless each of you with peace and joy in the forthcoming months and years, and may our generation witness the coming of the *Mashiach*. Amen!

“One who walks with the wise will grow wise.” (Proverbs 18:20)

My brother was a wise man and will be remembered by all of us that loved him. May we all walk and grow in the ways of God as my brother Oscar Lamar Gray did. He was a drum major for peace and he was a drum major for love!!!



I am grateful to God for the parents and siblings that He blessed me with. Many times when Nellie and I speak on our daily basis, before we hang up we usually say, *“Thank God for our upbringing.”*

Truly, we were awarded kindness and love from both sides of our family. Grandmother Ola C. Gray instilled in us our strong belief in God, Prayer, and Psalms. Grandmother Lillie Franklin was a woman of motherly wit and I received all my promotions when I worked for Continental Airlines by following her wise and sound advice.

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My warmest appreciation goes to Rabbi Leib and Rebbetzin Heyman, my Jewish parents, who nurtured me from start to finish.

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Special thanks to Yosef Ben Shlomo HaKohen, author of "The Universal Jew," who acted as my spiritual advisor.

He has an e-mail Torah study program which explores the universal vision of the Torah. The website address is: Hazon – Our Universal Vision: www.shemayisrael.com/publicat/hazon

My special thanks to Rebbetzin Leah Feldman for her wisdom and encouragement through out the years.

Hakaras hatov to Ita Olesker, for the final read of the new additions to each chapter; and sincere gratitude to Rebbetzin Chaya Heyman, (author of "Right from the Start,") for the fine tuning of grammar and Torah quotes in the new additions.

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longer with us. May their souls rest in peace: Rabbi Nachman Bulman, *zt"l*, Rabbi Aryeh Carmell, *zt"l*, Rabbi Avraham Ravitz, *zt"l*, and Rabbi Gabriel Beer, *zt"l*. They were God-fearing men that loved and embraced the Torah.

Above all, I would like to express my gratitude to *Hashem* for giving me the strength to walk through all my challenges in life.

"He leads the humble in the just way, and teaches the humble His way." (Psalm 25:9)

I received the following letter of recommendation for the first edition of this book.

Yeshivat Dvar Yerushalayim

The most famous convert in history was Ruth. As she started her journey to the Land of Israel, Ruth proclaimed: *“For where you go, I will go; your people shall be my people and your God my God.”*

“Journey to the land of my soul,” is the story of an African-American woman who followed in Ruth’s footsteps. Ahuvah Gray is the granddaughter of sharecroppers from Mound Bayou, Mississippi. Her grandmother taught her the Psalms of David at an early age and she believes that it was this teaching that was instrumental in bringing her to the faith of King David later in her life.

The book describes the various ups and downs of her active life until she settled in Israel and ultimately was able to proclaim, like David’s great-grandmother Ruth, “Your people shall be my people, and your God – my God.”

It is my feeling that this book will help both Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews to develop a new and deeper appreciation of their spiritual roots.

Rabbi Aryeh Carmell, *zt”l*

Rabbi Emanuel Feldman

...This is an affecting story of courage, steadfastness, and faith. Uplifting and inspiring, this tale of struggle and triumph offers the reader a fresh appreciation of what it means to become a member of *Am Yisrael*.

Rabbi Emanuel Feldman
Editor, Tradition Magazine

Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller

Knowing Ahuvah Gray is a spiritual adventure. The drama and sincerity of her search for a way of life in which her mind, spirit and body are all dancing to the tune of the same fiddler is unforgettable. As a teacher, presenting the great heroines of the Bible has always been a challenge. Our concerns are so petty and our desire to move forward is sometimes stunted by living in an era in which there are so few heroines. Ahuvah is one of these heroines. Her story cannot fail to inspire us to make our own lives a bit bigger.

Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller
Lecturer at *Neve Yerushalayim* and
Author of *More Precious than Pearls*,
Our Bodies Our Souls
This Way Up
Let's Face It
The Time is now
Battle Plans

The faith of your times will be the strength of your salvations, wisdom and knowledge; fear of Hashem – that is man's treasure. (Yeshayahu 33:6)

Each of the six words in the beginning half of this verse corresponds to one of the six orders of the Mishnah. The highest level of all, however, is *yiras Hashem*, fear of God. This is the greatest treasure mankind has.
(based on an explanation given by Rabbi Aharon Feldman)

HaRav Aharon Feldman is the distinguished *Rosh Yeshiva* of Ner Israel Rabbinical College in Baltimore, and is the author of the following books:

The Eye of the Storm
The Juggler and the King
The River, the Kettle, and the Bird
The Talmudic Encyclopedia, Vol. 1 (Ed.)
Mishnah Berurah, English version, Vols. 1&2 (Ed.)

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FORWARD

By Ruth Broyde-Sharone

Born in Chicago, the granddaughter of sharecroppers from Mound Bayou, Mississippi, raised as a Christian, Delores Gray followed a highly unlikely path from airline stewardess to minister, then tour guide, and finally to Orthodox Jew now living in Jerusalem.

How does one make sense of this journey? What were the spiritual pushes and pulls along the way that could explain this radical metamorphosis?

When African-American Delores Gray says she feels she was present at Mount Sinai and was one of the original Jews to receive the 613 mitzvos (commandments), her Christian friends are bewildered. Originally a born-again Christian who was first licensed as a minister at the Strait-Way house of Worship in Los Angeles and ordained as a minister at the international assemblies of God in San Diego, Delores now prays in Hebrew three times a day, keeps kosher and lives in Bayit Vegan, an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood in Jerusalem.

Ostracized by many of her born-again Christian friends, denounced by others for “trafficking with the devil”, Delores has not wavered from her course. Once a nonbeliever, as her mother described Delores as a young girl, today her life is informed and affected on the most intimate level by her belief in the Creator. She prays daily for vision and clarity, as a Jew to perform God’s will

The first time Delores visited Jerusalem, she knew instantaneously that it would become her home, and that she would leave everyone and everything behind if necessary to fulfill that vision.

How could a person so sheltered by family and friends take such a perilous step that would cut her off forever from her roots? How could she abandon her religious heritage and her home-land? Unlike Ruth of the Bible, Delores had no Naomi to cling to, no Naomi to lead the way as she changed her home, her people, and her God.

What she did have was her God and the people He provided for her – strangers who became her guides, her friends and ultimately her new family. “Journey to the land of My Soul,” is the story of Delores’ amazing journey to Zion, a journey full of thorns and nettles; a story that ultimately transformed Delores to Ahuvah, a daughter of Israel.

Ruth Broyde-Sharone

Journalist, Documentary Filmmaker, Interior Decorator

Introduction

Hashem said to Avram, “Go for yourself (lecha) from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you.” (Genesis 12:1)

The word *lecha* denotes: *“For your benefit and for your own advantage.” (Rashi)*

July, 1996. I inhaled deeply. As I stood waiting at the pulpit of the World Council of Churches in the United Nations, in Geneva, Switzerland, I realized that this would be my last sermon as an African-American minister. Not long before, I had decided to become a Jew.

The event was organized to honor the fiftieth anniversary of UNICEF and UNESCO being held together with the UN Commission on Human Rights Sub-Commission. Wilds Spalding, an indefatigable organizer and a nongovernmental leader at the United Nations for twenty-five years, had invited my dear friend, Ruth Broyde-Sharone, and me to participate as nongovernmental official observer-delegates and to speak at a round table discussion on the effects of racism and intolerance.

This was Sunday morning, at the religious service; my audience at the World Council of Churches included others from our U.S. delegation as well as United Nations personnel and local residents of Geneva, Switzerland. It was a mixed crowd from diverse religious backgrounds.

My eyes scanned the audience as I tried to assess the needs of the group. I wanted to speak openly, without alienating them. I had to find just the right words to engage their hearts.

I had been introduced as a Christian minister. There were many Christians in the audience who, if they had known the truth, would have been deeply disturbed by my decision to become a Jew. What could I possibly say that would touch the heart of every individual present and still be an affirmation of my life’s choice?

My mother had always taught us when we were growing up, “Whatever you do in life, do it with dignity.” When I was young, I thought she was speaking about our own personal dignity, but, as I grew up, I came to realize she was also speaking about the dignity of others. She wanted us to carry out every deed in life with the utmost dignity and respect for the other person’s position.

I would need to heed my mother’s message, but I was faced with an enormous dilemma. How could I remain true to the convictions of my heart and still be sensitive to the beliefs of the people in the audience?

Those were the thoughts that careened through my mind as I looked out at the heterogeneous group. As I anxiously searched for an opening phrase, my grandmother’s words reverberated in my ears: “Just ask the Lord to help you.”

An announcement regarding the service shocked me back into awareness of where I was standing. I looked out at the audience and saw Ruth’s eyes. She was the only person in the audience who grasped the enormity of my problem. With a tearful look, she gave me a gentle nod of approval.

I began my sermon with an affectionate description of my mother’s hobby, collecting international dolls. I had my own “United Nations” of dolls in my bedroom, I told them. I felt myself grow calm. The words began to arrange themselves with little effort on my part.

“Avraham, our patriarch, was the progenitor of the three major religions,” I said. “He was also the main protagonist of my life.”

I shared with the audience my favorite story from the time that I had first started reading the Bible. I used to close my eyes and pretend that Avraham was my great-grandfather, and everywhere he went I was by his side, a little child holding his hand – “I walked with him through the entire Land of Israel.”

I then approached the most delicate part of my talk. “Today my childhood aspiration is being realized. When I leave Switzerland, I will

be returning to my new spiritual home, Israel.” I told the audience of the startled and critical reaction my decision had provoked among my friends in the United States. “Please don’t tell anyone that you’re moving to Israel,” one of my friends implored me. “They’ll think you’re crazy.”

Everyone there broke out in laughter with me. In this, my last sermon, I had indeed reached their hearts.

I had been a successful, middle-class, African-American professional with a comfortable lifestyle in California. All my major life needs, material and spiritual alike, had been met... or so I thought. But the irresistible call of God to make Israel my home and the Jews my people was so strong that I was prepared to give up everything: home, possessions, friends, and even my family.

When people ask me what made me want to undergo the difficult and radical transformation of becoming a Jew, I tell them, “I was inspired by God’s divine call to our father, Avraham;” that call represented an awesome spiritual summons to Avraham, and to all those who follow in his footsteps.

“Lech lecha,” the passage begins in Hebrew, as God speaks to Avraham. *“Go for yourself from your land, from your birthplace and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you.”*

Only God – the great artist of the universe – could bring about the first imaginary steps in the secret thought-life of a little Black child and lead her all the way along a path which grows clearer day by day. I really don’t know where I would be if not for the awesome spiritual power contained in God’s call to Abraham and to all those who follow in his footsteps. A convert has to esteem God above her very own family. That became clear to me as I began to undertake the painful process of separating from everything and everyone whom I had held dear my entire life.

Lech lecha: And so I left my native land, my family, my relatives, and my father’s house to go up to the Land of Israel, the land of my ancestors, the land of my soul.

Chapter One

Grandma's Hands

The view from my first apartment in Bayit Vegan, Jerusalem, was breathtaking. To the east, I could see the new villas of Ramat Sharet and the picturesque gardens of the Holy Land Hotel, and down below that the Malcha Shopping Center and the Teddy Kollek Sports Stadium. Past Malcha the road climbed steeply to the sweeping crest of Gilo, the highest in altitude of all Jerusalem's neighborhoods. Behind Gilo and further east, Bethlehem and the settlements of Gush Etzion skirted a high plateau to the southeast.

The aroma of the apple pie baking in the oven filled the room. I started to sing "Grandma's Hands," as recorded by Bill Withers.

Grandma's hands used to hand me a piece of candy.

Grandma's hands picked me up each time I fell.

Grandma's hands really came in handy,

"Nancy, why you want to spank that boy,

What do you want to spank him for?

He didn't drop no apple core."

But I don't have Grandma anymore.

When I get to heaven I'll look for grandma's hands.

But I don't have Grandma any more.

When I get to heaven I'll look for grandma's hands.

I would always sing that song when I made apple pies. I thought that perhaps the singing might help me bake pies almost as good as Grandmother's, especially in my kosher kitchen.

I remember once watching Grandmother Gray preparing a pie for me to take home. She peeled her homegrown apples with precision, boiled them, and added about two tablespoons of butter, a teaspoon each of

nutmeg and vanilla flavor, and half a cup of sugar... and that was it! For the crust, the best part of all, she worked a little Crisco, water and a pinch of salt into three cups of sifted flour. It was always golden brown on top, and each pie was better than the one before.

Married at a very young age, my paternal grandparents were gentle, refined and religious folk. Sylvester and Ola C. Gray lived in Mound Bayou, Mississippi, where the entire municipality, hospitals, schools, police and fire department, town hall, houses of worship, and businesses were all owned and operated by Blacks.

Great love and mutual respect filled the Gray home. Since I was always in awe of my Grandparents' spirituality, I never paid much attention to their outward appearance. Now, when I sit and look at the family album, I see the stark contrast in their looks.

Granddaddy had keen features and beautiful black skin unmarred by any wrinkles. His mother, Georgiana, and his father Poppa Lee Gray, were from Vicksburg, Mississippi, and later moved to Marigold. I remember Granddaddy telling me the family history as passed down by his elders. Poppa Lee's mother was a Native American Indian. His wife Georgiana, whom we called Mama Georgia, was a Geisha, a member of a group of Africans who traveled on slave ships to Louisiana via France, and ultimately settled in New Orleans. I can remember her beautiful pale-red skin and long black braids. Poppa Lee was brown-skinned and full of energy.

Grandmother was slightly taller than Granddaddy, with a kind of southern sophistication. She had a fair complexion which was important to Black folk in those days – White people took more kindly to the fair-skinned Negroes. Grandmother's English was impeccable, or at least I thought so. It seemed as if she was always correcting everyone's speech and behavior. "You chillun have got to learn to speak proper English if the White man is going to hire you. You must get an education." I don't ever recall a harsh word passing her lips. And yet I didn't resent her advice; instinctively, I knew what she said was for my well-being.

Grandmother's family the McWilliams, were educated. Her brother owned an entire block of businesses in Clarkdale, Mississippi – a grocery store, cleaners, and the funeral parlor. Once, when we visited them, I remember Grandmother pointing out all the businesses with a palpable sense of pride.

During summer vacation, my older brother, Oscar, my sister, Nellie and I, plus several cousins, were sent down south from Chicago, where we lived, to visit our grandparents on their 125 acre farm. In addition to the summer crew, we had three uncles and three aunts, all unmarried, living there. To us children, the house seemed so huge. Now I wonder how we all fit into those five small rooms, but Grandmother and Granddaddy were always glad to have all of us.

Those brief annual visits remain among my most cherished memories. I loved the beautiful blossoms, the fragrance of the fruits, the peach trees, the apple orchard that surrounded the house, and most of all the pecan trees. I remember also complaining forever about the pump and the toilet which, in the early years, were both outside. One year my constant worry was that my precious patent leather shoes would not survive the muddy unpaved roads.

Their house looked like all the others in that part of the South: wood-framed, two steps up to the porch, and a screened doorway to the living room. I learned later that they were called shotgun houses: If you shot a bullet into the front door it would go straight out through the back way. In the kitchen stood an old potbellied stove from which Grandmother served her home-cooked delights. The homey table and chairs, where we all managed to fit quite nicely, were in the middle of the room. Granddaddy always relaxed in his rocking chair next to the old piano in the living room. The old wooden rocker had a pretty floral seat cushion, with a matching cover for the sofa that Grandmother had made.

“There's boys' work and there's girls' work,” Granddaddy used to say. He made sure, however, that the work was divided equally. Alas, his idea of girls' work included feeding the geese and chickens and milking the cows, as well as picking cotton. As a city girl, I was terrified of live farm animals. My feeling was that they belonged in a

zoo. The chickens always seemed to be pecking at my feet from all sides and the geese were the messiest, most miserable creatures I'd ever laid eyes upon! I wondered why they made such an angry racket.

Grandma's hands picked me up each time I fell.

Even as an eight-year-old, I refused to believe that God had created me to pick cotton. In retrospect, I think that my childhood aversion to farm work arose from the perception that engaging in those activities was not my true purpose in life. I felt a deep hunger for spirituality – for some meaningful cause to which I could devote my life.

I loathed picking cotton. It was hard work, done in beastly hot weather. In my mind's eye, I pictured my aching hands covered with bandages in an attempt to protect my fingers from the sharp hulls of the cotton. I had to cross a rickety old bridge to get to the cotton fields. My biggest fear was that I would fall off that bridge into the muddy creek below. One day, of course, I did! My brother Oscar and one of my uncles jumped into the creek to rescue me. Their efforts were successful and greatly appreciated. At least I wasn't wearing my patent-leather shoes! All I remember is my screaming and thinking, how could such a horrible thing happen to a nice girl like me?

Grandma's hands used to hand me a piece of candy.

My brother Oscar carried me back to my grandmother, whose warm hug and embrace soon calmed my fears. She gave me my favorite lollipop and a nice warm bath. Granddaddy, responsible gentleman that he was, fixed the bridge that same day. However, I could not be persuaded to return to the cotton fields.

Nancy, why you want to spank that boy? What do you want to spank him for? He didn't drop no apple core.

Granddaddy was the disciplinarian. Whenever any of the grandchildren disobeyed, he'd send another outside to get his "switch." We all knew what that meant! "Now, Syl, that's enough," Grandmother would say. She was the softhearted one. "Don't you whip that child too much!"

I never received a whipping. Just hearing the wails of a recipient of Granddaddy's switch was enough to keep me in line.

Grandmother possessed outstanding skills in all the domestic arts. She made some of the most beautiful patchwork quilts I've ever seen in my life. But her main teaching to her children and grandchildren was about obedience to God. Her close relationship with Him grew and flourished, nourished by her prayers and complete trust in her Creator. As Baptists, my grandparents believed very strongly in Bible study and prayer. At the dinner table my grandfather would start the prayers, and then each child, from the eldest to the youngest, had to recite a Bible verse. The only verse I could remember was "The Lord is my shepherd," from the twenty-third Psalm. Every evening after dinner we would gather in the living room and entertain ourselves with Bible quizzes. We had no television, so our primary nighttime entertainment was to memorize all the names of the books and characters of the Bible.

Grandmother taught all her children and grandchildren the twenty-third Psalm. I couldn't have been more than four years old when she first taught it to me on one of her visits to Chicago. It tells us, she would explain, "That God provided for all mankind and He fulfills our every need." Maybe because I was so young, Grandmother's words made a deep impression that has stayed with me throughout the years. Whenever any difficulty arose, I followed my grandmother's example and "set up residence" in the Book of Psalms.

Many years later, while working for Continental Airlines, I experienced one of the most rewarding visits I'd ever had with my grandparents. Travel concessions from my employer in California made a visit possible during July, the hottest month of the year. That stay was to become a turning point in my life.

I had always felt drawn to my grandparents and wondered what it was that pulled me so strongly to them. Over the years I gradually came to realize that it was the rare peace and stability of my grandparents' home that called to me. I realized that my grandparents had laid the foundation for the spiritual upbringing of all their children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren. Throughout my entire

spiritual journey their lives remained a constant source of strength. Whenever any of us became ill, Grandmother, like the people of the Bible, believed that it was the Lord that would do the healing, not the doctors.

Years later when I studied medical treatment during Biblical days, I discovered that the Jewish people went to the prophets when they became ill. I was also taught in seminary that sickness is often a spiritual problem that manifests itself through the physical. Today I marvel at how my grandparents, although uneducated academically, were extremely knowledgeable of Biblical concepts.

But now I wasn't a little girl in patent leather shoes. I was a travel executive in my forties, on a visit to my aging grandparents. My Uncle Jesse picked me up at Greenville airport. The sight of the lush green weeping willows that lined the paved road to my grandparent's home was so beautiful. Even the swamp that was necessary for the weeping willows' survival had a certain charm. I could hear the mosquitoes buzzing around. The air was so fresh and clean, in sharp contrast to the California smog I'd grown used to. "The earth is the Lord's, Uncle Jesse," I chanted, and fastened my seat belt.

The ride to my grandparents gave me sufficient time to catch up on family details. My uncle and his wife had completed the building of their new home and Uncle Jesse had a job at the Baxter Pharmaceutical Company.

As we turned down the road to Grandma's I could smell the aroma of the fruit orchard. *It's picking time*, I mused. *My how things had changed since my last visit ten years ago.* The rickety bridge and the cotton fields were no more. The creek into which I had once fallen had dried up. The chickens and geese that had once intimidated me had become my friends; with the passage of time, I had become more appreciative of God's creation. My, how my perception had changed! The hand pump was useless and the outhouse had been replaced with indoor facilities. No more perilous trips to the outhouse. Even the muddy roads were paved and no longer posed a hazard to my shoes.

Granddaddy peered over his glasses as I entered the doorway. “Give me a hug, Delores.”

Here, in the modest living room, it seemed that little had changed. Granddaddy’s old rocking chair was still in the middle of the room. The old piano was now only an heirloom, having long ago struck its last chord. The old sofa was still holding firm in the corner. The kitchen however, had undergone a face-lift and the old pot-bellied stove, which had provided warmth as well as these well-remembered apple pies, was gone, it had been replaced by a modern gas stove which proved to me once and for all, that it was not the stove but my grandmother’s culinary talents that made the food good. She had prepared a wonderful meal of fried chicken, golden brown corn bread, and collard greens.

The aroma alone transported me back in time to those big family dinners.

“Grandmother, remember how Uncle Berlin used to play Negro spirituals on the piano?”

“Yes! Delores, you chilluns had such lovely voices, it was truly a gift from God.”

I knew she was being kind or perhaps she didn’t remember that I couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket. Oh, how I yearned to sing like the rest of them. When my aunt, Lee Esther, would sing a solo, her voice soared to the heavens; I was sure that God was listening.

Our family had its own choir. My grandmother had even taught the girls to curtsy and the boys to bow after our performance. “I remember in the old days, how the White folks would drive for miles on Sundays just to hear Black folks sing the Negro spirituals,” Grandmother remarked.

Expressing gratitude was one of her trademarks: “Delores, Syl and I are so happy that you chilluns haven’t forgotten about us. We’re grateful to have educated grandchildren with good careers. We still pray for all our grandchildren every night.”

Grandma's hands really came in handy.

Once we had prepared for bed, I happened to walk by my grandparents' room as Grandmother was praying. I stood there mesmerized, unable to believe how long she remained on her knees. Being a Baptist, she turned up the volume when she got to her family. "And Lord, help all my children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren to serve You." How I yearned to pray like that. I had goose pimples as I listened to her pour out her soul. What a commencement to prayer!

When at last she rose to her feet I asked in awe, "Grandmother, you still kneel down to pray?"

She placed her hand in mine, the hand of a praying woman. "Yes, Delores, that's the only way I know how to pray. I pray that you'll always remember that your help comes from God."

"Your help comes from God." Those words have been a source of strength and comfort throughout the years. The example of Grandmother, at age seventy-eight, pouring out her heart in prayer had a profound effect on my life. Intrigued and inspired by the scene I'd witnessed, one morning shortly after my return home I decided that I too would dedicate my life to prayer. I had read in the Book of Psalms, "*Evening, morning, and noon, I supplicate and moan; and He has heard my voice*" (Psalms 55:18). Since King David had prayed three times a day, I would do the same, and so I did!

At this point in my life I had several years of conscientious Bible study behind me, but still, something crucial was missing. Now I knew: it was prayer.

I envied Grandmother her special relationship with her Creator. How wonderful it would be to experience just one-tenth of her spiritual devotion. Determined to gain deeper insight into my grandparents' spiritual strength, I returned each year to the farm in Mound Bayou; I knew that a vital element was missing in my life, and I knew also that I

wanted it far more than anything else. Having learned more about God through studying the Bible, I recognized that my grandparents were the two holiest people I had ever known.

When I told Grandmother that I was planning to become a minister, she wrote me a beautiful letter. She was delighted with the knowledge that I had decided to dedicate my life to prayer and to studying the Bible. She traveled all the way from Mound Bayou, Mississippi to hear my first sermon and song a beautiful song entitled, “*Yield not to temptation.*” I won’t ever forget that day as long as I live. During one of our heart to heart private conversations she gave me this rule to apply to my studies:

“Delores, you must study the word of God to know His will, and He will guide your life. Since you love to pray, you must pray until you get an answer. Don’t get weary if He delays, you hear! God’s delay does not mean no.”

Years later, while browsing in a bookstore in Safed during a tour I was leading to the Holy Land, I saw a book called a “Jewish *Siddur.*” I had no idea at that time what a Jewish prayer book was. When I opened the book my first impression was, “These prayers are very powerful! I have to buy this book.”

I started praying from that book on the bus with my tour group from the States. I couldn’t put it down. At one point I was so moved, I started crying. I was reading some of my favorite Psalms, “*I was a youth and also have aged, and I have not seen a righteous man forsaken, or his children begging for bread. God will give might to His people; God will bless His people with peace*” (Psalms 37:25, 29:11). I realized that everything my grandmother had spoken about and believed in could be found in the Book of Psalms. At the time I was a minister, with no idea of how Jewish people prayed. I did not even know that Jews prayed three times a day. I would just open the book and read the prayers at random. Yet my grandmother’s strong ethical teachings, which she had gotten from the Psalms, were beginning to change my life.

My grandparents were privileged to celebrate their fiftieth wedding anniversary. I was honored to officiate as minister in the renewal of

their wedding vows. My sister was unable to attend due to previous work commitments with Donna Summers, but she contributed by making a veil for my grandmother. My grandparents were the spiritual pillars that held us together as a family.

I will forever cherish the fond memories of their Godly lives. The peace that continued to draw me to their home I've found here in Bayit Vegan in the homes of my new family, the Jewish people.

After my grandfather's death in 1986, my grandmother was diagnosed with an aneurysm. Still grieving over the loss of her husband, she had lost the will to live. The doctors weren't expecting her to survive, but we didn't care what they said. We had faith in God. Our entire family prayed and fasted. When Grandmother went back to the doctor, he couldn't find the aneurysm. It was gone! We were overjoyed to do for our grandmother what she would have done for us in the same situation. We were convinced that because of our prayers God had granted her more time to be with us.

Two years later, my family mourned the indescribable loss of my grandmother, Ola C.Gray, a woman of boundless faith; she died a natural death. I am certain that Grandma's words and deed have earned her a share in the World to Come. She wasn't aware of the seven Noachide Laws, but she lived by them. Solomon, the King of Israel who bequeathed God's treasures of wisdom to Jew and gentile alike, wrote: "*A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children*" (Proverbs 13:22). Rashi explains, "A good man will leave an inheritance of his merit and his property to his son's sons, for his wealth and his property are laid away for the righteous."

These days, whenever I make apple pie in my kosher kitchen in Bayit Vegan, the words of "*Grandma's Hands*" come to my lips and ignite the memory of my beloved grandmother – but my pies don't ever come out as well as hers. When I told this story to my rebbetzin, she said, "Ahuvah, the reason your pies don't come out like your grandmother's, even in your kosher kitchen, is because her apples were "homegrown." If "homegrown" best describes Grandmother's pies; "homegrown" best describes me as well.

Today, at the Shabbos table with my host families, the singing of beautiful Shabbos melodies sometimes transports me to the humble table of my roots. In those days the songs we sang were old, soul-stirring hymns. It was Grandmother's practice to prepare all food for Sunday on Saturday. Sunday was strictly a religious day, set aside for acknowledging the Lord.

"You chilluns have to know that you have to honor the Lord," Grandma would say. We weren't allowed to iron, or even take a bath. The only things we were permitted to do were to wash our faces and brush our teeth. Then we would get dressed, eat breakfast, and go to the house of worship. Grandmother even combed and braided our hair on Saturday night, and tied it with a scarf, to ensure that we honored God.

Years later, as we studied the halachos (laws) of Shabbos in the *Neve Yerushalayim* Women's College in Jerusalem, my mind wandered back to my grandmother's house on the Sabbath: almost a preparatory course for observing Shabbos. Living in Jerusalem, and experiencing the combination of strict discipline, and warm atmosphere in Jewish homes on Shabbos so much reminds me of the warmth and peace of my grandparents' home. All the pieces to the puzzle are finally in place: The little Black girl with pigtails who used to observe all of the dos and don'ts of her grandmother in Mississippi has finally made it home. When I sit at the Shabbos table, my eyes often fill with tears when I realize it's partly in the merit of Grandmother that I became an observant Jewess.

Grandma, I love you!



It has been a special privilege for me to travel the world and share my story. Personally, I feel that it's not really my story that I am sharing; it's more the life and legacy of the two women that have influenced my life to what I have become today: my mother and grandmother, may their souls rest in peace.

This story about my grandmother is one of my favorites. Even though it

took months of writing and rewriting to get it into the final stages for the publisher, I still felt it was incomplete, for my grandmother's life paved the pathway that brought me to *tehillim* (Psalms) and *tefillah* (prayer).

One morning after I had recited *Modeh Ani* (I, gratefully, thank You) and looked through my skylight, I said to *Hashem* (God), "There is still something missing from this chapter."¹ All of a sudden the song, "*Grandma's Hands*" came to my mind. I was so grateful because that song accurately described my grandmother, and my chapter was complete. Recently, my paternal family had a reunion in Mound Bayou, Mississippi, over the Memorial Day, weekend. I really wanted to go and be with them. However, after *davening* (praying) extensively about the situation, I realized that the best way I could honor my grandparents was to bring Jerusalem to them. So I made a DVD in my apartment with a panoramic view of Jerusalem from my balcony and then gave them an intimate personal talk. After having shared many stories with them about my world wide travels, I began to cry. They weren't tears of sadness, but tears of joy.

On this side of the family most of them are professionals: doctors, lawyers, and we even have a cousin who studied at a university in Paris, France, and is now an architect. There is also a congressman on the Gray side of the family. Although this might sound impressive there was a more meaningful message I wanted to pass on to them. It was the same one that my grandmother passed on to me, a message of love and faith in our Creator.

So as I started to speak about the legacy of my grandmother it was extremely humbling, and I spoke as I had never spoken before. It was because I was speaking to her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren about her life and her love for her family, as well as her tremendous faith and trust in the Almighty. I just couldn't control the tears flowing down my face. Who would have ever imagined that Ola C. Gray, the daughter of a sharecropper, would have her story told in

¹ Prayer said upon rising in the morning

such exotic places as Jerusalem, South Africa, Australia, London and Belgium, among others? Who would have ever thought that her name would be known by religious Jewish women in Jewish communities all over the world?

Since I have been privileged to be on the lecture circuit for sixteen years, there are so many wonderful stories that come to my mind regarding my grandmother, one of my favorites happened when I first visited Johannesburg, South Africa. I was having lunch with my friend Shira Taylor, at the dairy kosher restaurant, and the owner of the restaurant came over to me and inquired if I were Ahuvah Gray. When I answered, “Yes,” her response took me by surprise.

“I want you to know that after reading your book, *“My Sister, the Jew,”* I say *Tehillim* daily with my children because of your grandmother.”

My friend Shira looked at me with tears in her eyes and said, “Ahuvah, do you believe that? What a *zechus* (merit) for your grandmother!” I sat there with tears in my eyes as well and thought: *There is no secret to what God can do.*

This continued to happen on numerous occasions. One time I was lecturing in Melbourne, Australia, and two girls came over to me at the end of the lecture and asked,

“Do you remember us?”

I recognized their faces, but couldn’t recall where we had met. “Ahuvah, we were at the lecture with Shira Taylor, in Jerusalem, at the Aish Ha Torah Fellowships in the Old City.”

Once the connection was made we embraced each other and continued to talk. They had become religious and were studying at a seminary. My heart filled with joy when they shared with me the impact my grandmother’s story had made on their lives. It is so amazing to witness the transformation of a Jewish *neshamah* (soul); those girls had seen

the light. They had given up their slacks and short sleeves and were dressed so modestly, they could pass any rebbetzin's (rabbi's wife) scrutiny with honor. Their departing words still resonate in my ears.

“Ahuvah, we are saying *Tehillim* every day because of your grandmother.”

As I continued to travel the world as a Jewess, I remembered what I had learned from my teachers. That everything in life is *Midah k'neged midah* (measure for measure); by sharing the moral and ethical teachings of my parents and grandparents with my readership, they become spiritually inspired, and I do as well.

Another meaningful occasion happened when I was lecturing to the Adass women's organization in Goldersgreen, London. At the end of the lecture, a woman asked me the following question: “Ahuvah, did you know any other people like your grandparents?”

I paused for a moment and gave her question some deep thought before I answered. “I am sure there were more people like them, but I wasn't acquainted with them. My grandparents laid the spiritual foundation for the lives of their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.”

“Ahuvah,” she said, “do you feel that your spirituality came from your grandmother? I work with Black nurses at the hospital, and every Black woman I have met is spiritual.”

“I really don't think of myself as spiritual,” I answered. “I simply feel like I am doing the *ratzon* (will) of *Hashem* by traveling the world and inspiring Jewish women to recite *Tehillim* with their children. These experiences have taught me that there are no coincidences in life. It's just Hashem's way of remaining anonymous. He is literally behind the scene calling all the shots. As a result of carrying out the *ratzon* of *Hashem*, (will of God) I have redefined happiness. True happiness is fulfilling the Will of God.”

Psalms 23:6 “*May only goodness and kindness pursue me all the days*”

of my life, and I will dwell in the house of Hashem for long years.”²

² Translation from Artscroll Tanach Series. Ibn Ezra (v. 6) explains that *tov*, good, refers to spiritual self-enrichment. *Chesed*, kindness, describes a deep concern for the spiritual welfare of others, which is manifested in an effort to teach them the ways of God. These two activities should become a constant, irreversible way of life. So much so, that the ingrained nature to do only good would not allow even a momentary lapse. Thus his noble inclination will “pursue” him relentlessly to continue on the path of goodness and kindness.