

## **Traveling Companion: Is that Kosher?**

### **Fr. Michael Tracey**

The other day, I received a phone call from a local psychologist. She went on to explain that she had a client who was dealing with some "life issues" and wondered if I would be willing to talk to the client. As one who is open to what is challenging and different, I said "yes."

A few days later, the client called me and began to "feel" me out to see if I was real or if she might feel comfortable talking to me. We talked for a while on the telephone. She told me that she was Jewish, although she had not practiced it since her youth. She was married to a man who was a Baptist and both were professors at the University of Southern Mississippi.

She asked me about some of my background and then began to tell me about hers. A native New Yorker, she married a West Virginian. She received various degrees, including a doctorate from several universities in the New York and West Virginia areas, even graduated from the College of New Rochelle in New York, which I visited while studying in the New York area.

She asked if I would be willing to meet with her at her home. She explained that she was suffering from Multiple Sclerosis and was hindered in her mobility. Her husband was out of town, visiting his mother in Virginia. We decided on a time and date to meet.

I arrived at her home on Tuesday afternoon. I knocked, heard a voice inside say, "I'm coming." Soon the door opened and I was led into a living room with well-polished hardwood. A glassed-off patio, gave one a panoramic view of the lake and the 11<sup>th</sup> hole on the golf course. I was invited to sit down on a sheet-covered couch and the conversation began.

She asked me if I wondered why she invited a Catholic priest to talk with her about her "life-issues." She then went on to explain. She said, "Some preachers, all they are interested in doing is in trying to convert you to their way of thinking, to their religion. They are not interested in listening to your story."

She began to tell me more about her story. She was forty-four years old; Jewish, but not practicing; taught marketing at the university level; now retired with disability because of her disease.

Her Multiple Sclerosis had faced her with her own mortality. Her pain, eased at times by steroids and morphine, challenged her to look at her life and its direction. She began to ask questions about the meaning of life; was there an after-life; why this disease; what happens to her after death; her own anger at what was happening to her.

She began to talk about productivity and wondered about her own productivity in life, now that her mobility was limited and she could no longer teach. In her questioning about productivity, she tried to measure her success and failures and where the disease was leading her.

She talked about her Jewish roots, the sacrifices her forbearers endured in order to preserve that faith and how she needed to be true to that faith. She indicated that if she ever would consider converting to another religion, she would convert to Catholicism because it was more accepting, more tolerant. She mentioned that her sister converted from Judaism to Islam, which didn't gain favor with her parents.

Her questions were both probing and through provoking. Is there an after-life? Where are my family members that have died? What is the purpose of life? What does it mean to have a productive life? The God of the Old Testament is stern and fearful, should I explore the New Testament? Why do you believe? How have you come to that belief? If you were in my shoes, with M.S. and was laid up in bed, what would you do? How do you evaluate your contribution to life?

The conversation lasted just over an hour. Tiring, she thanked me for coming. I told her that she knew where I was if she needed me and I left a different person.