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FROM BLEACHED-BLOND PRINCESS TO QUEEN MOTHER

From beauty pageants to the silver screen, I ultimately hit the jackpot.

Kaila Lasky wasn't always my name. I came into the world as Kelly Dianne Scott – double-L, double-N, double-T. This name was not only designed to sound as non-Jewish as possible, but was carefully calibrated to look symmetrical up on the marquee. I kid you not.

Even before I was born, the plan was for me to be a star.

By age 3, I was having my hair bleached blonder and competing in beauty pageants: Little Miss America, Little Miss Half Pint. At age 9, I was performing in local theater, and at 12 I gained early admission to the High School for Performing Arts in Manhattan (of the *Fame* movies and TV series).

Throughout my childhood, I absorbed the message that everything important about me was on the outside and everything I could possibly want in life was somewhere "out there."

This ideology was reinforced at Performing Arts, where all of us aspiring actors, dancers and musicians shared the dream of being rich, famous, talented, powerful and gorgeous. What mattered was how we looked, how we performed, and how loud the applause.

At 14, I costarred in a groundbreaking film about homelessness and kindness called *The Shopping Bag Lady*, directed by Academy Award winner Bert Salzman. By then my stage name was Holly Scott. (Kelly was a little too Irish Catholic, even for me.) The movie gave me the golden ticket to show business with membership in the Screen Actors Guild and all other theatrical unions.

I continued working in film, TV and theater in New York for the next 13 years, yet it remained for me a sideline. My mantra was "money can buy happiness" and the starving actors' life was just not for me. I didn't want to wait on tables and live in a shabby, walk-up apartment in the Bronx. I wanted a first-class life in Manhattan, with a doorman and concierge, on the Upper East Side.

To get these big bucks I used my charm and went into sales – first selling ridiculously expensive clothing and then real estate. By age 22, I was leasing director for RiverTower in Sutton Place, "the most expensive rental building in Manhattan."

Tenants included Robert Redford, Saudi royalty and boldface names in international society, entertainment and finance. Finally, I thought, this is where I belong. If I can sit at Vera Wang's table in Southampton, hang out with Prince Dimitri of Yugoslavia, walk the red carpet at the Costume Institute Ball at the Met, and vacation in Marrakech, Paris and London, then I'll have truly made it.

I did all these things and more. I got the Upper East Side apartment with a swimming pool on the roof and an enormous wrap-around terrace where I threw champagne-fueled soirees for the beautiful crowd. There were black tie events, VIP rooms, seaplanes, cigarette boats, and a presidential inaugural ball. It was glamorous, fun and exciting. Looking from the outside, one could say I had it all.

So why, when the last guest had left the terrace, or the club closed, or the vacation ended, did I feel so empty inside? Where was the satisfaction and peace? When the music stopped, I was alone with myself. The emptiness and void was unbearable at times. Something huge was missing in my life, but I didn't know what it was or where to find it. So I kept pushing forward, hoping that the next vacation, relationship or luxury purchase would be the answer.

It was during this whirlwind that I made my first fragile connection with Judaism.

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Growing up, Judaism simply wasn't relevant. After my grandfather died when I was five, it was out with almost everything Jewish. We'd light *Chanukah* candles and then go to our Christian friends' house for gifts around the tree. We attended a Passover *Seder* (the kind that gets shorter every year: *Dayeinu!*) and ate bagels. For most of my life, that was the sum total of my Jewish connection.

And yet, my non-Jewish name notwithstanding, I had always felt Jewish in my heart. So at age 20, when I first heard about the High Holidays, I had a fleeting thought of attending services. But none of my friends were going and I heard you had to have tickets, so... it would be another five years till I made it to a *Rosh Hashana* service.

That experience went on for hours and was entirely in a foreign language, yet something struck a chord. Memories of going to synagogue with my grandfather brought me back to a time when I felt safe and part of something important and special.

I had been living half a life, disconnected from the essential part of myself, and it was failing me. I knew in precise detail what kind of house I wanted to live in, what kind of car I wanted to drive, and what kind of salary I wanted to earn. But what kind of person did I want to be? What did I stand for? What did I believe in? These were questions I'd never much considered.

I began attending some evening classes in Manhattan, and as I learned more about my Judaism, I slowly dispelled the stereotypes and misconceptions I was

holding onto, like the belief that Judaism regards women as second-class citizens. Although I didn't know any religious Jewish women, I was certain they were all barefoot, pregnant and chained to the stove. Someone needed to rescue them, educate them, liberate them. It turns out I was dead wrong about that (I met observant Jewish women who were doctors, lawyers, corporate execs) and about many other things.

I began to study Torah in depth, one verse at a time. It was an intellectual adventure unlike any I had ever experienced. I found out about many Jewish holidays that I'd never heard of. I discovered *Shabbat*, the weekly dinner party with fine china, gourmet food and wine. I loved the conversation that moved beyond gossip, fashion and politics.

Above all, I found an atmosphere in these homes that was so much more peaceful than the frenetic lifestyle I was leading. Husbands and wives interacted with love and respect. The children were intelligent, respectful and refined. They were unlike any kids I'd ever met.

I will never forget turning to my mother at the Passover Seder we attended at the rabbi's house and saying, "Someday, I want to have kids like these." If you had known me then, you'd have laughed out loud. My life was so far removed from this family's reality that there was no possible way I would ever have children like these (if I'd even have kids at all).

This was all incredibly compelling – but I was like a "Judaism tourist": a nice place to visit, but I don't want to live there. I had been focused on externalities for 25 years, and just because I discovered my inner dimension, a soul that longed for truth and beauty and meaning, didn't mean it had any muscle whatsoever.

My attitude was more like the Billy Joel song: "I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints – the sinners are much more fun!"

The pull in my old direction was just too strong. One Friday night I was invited to a rabbi's magical Shabbos table and got a call to attend the Saudi princess's birthday party in Miami. It was no contest and I was on the next plane.

Who knows what kind of life I would have today if the two parallel worlds I was straddling hadn't come crashing together.

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My friend tried to set me up on a blind date with a guy who was not only "orthodox" but lived in – gulp! – Buffalo. I had zero interest. I put it off for four months and then finally agreed to a mercy date just to satisfy this friend who kept pushing the match.

When I came down to my lobby expecting to meet the pasty-faced, clammy-handed, hunched-over religious guy, imagine my astonishment when I saw an Adonis in blue jeans and a white jacket posed like Rodin's "The Thinker" on my

lobby chair. *OMG, that can't be him.*} But it was! From the start I was amazed that he really wanted to get to know me, inside and out.

But orthodox?! I was totally irreligious when we met and he had been keeping Shabbat and kosher for many years. At the same time, he had been on tour with the Rolling Stones, acted in a few movies, and was a successful businessman. He had it all: the flash and the substance, the physical and spiritual, body and soul. Who could resist such a package? Not me.

Three months later, we were engaged, and four months later I was on a yacht, circling Manhattan, starring in the role of my life at my own big fat Jewish wedding. I was sailing off into the sunset to begin on-the-job training as an observant Jewish woman.

My first real hurdle to clear was this vague sense that living a Torah life was all about obligations and responsibilities. I'm not so altruistic and I wanted to know: What's in it for me?

Once I got into it, being observant wasn't at all what I expected. I thought it would be an interesting, if perhaps burdensome addition to my "real" life. But I discovered that Torah all those "rules and regulations" turned out to be time-tested tools for success in the most important areas of my life: relationships, parenting, and handling all kinds of challenges. Torah gave me tools for attaining true inner peace, balancing home and career, and for keeping the romance alive in marriage, decade after decade.

I took my time growing into Jewish observance, moving at my own pace. Judaism is not an all-or-nothing proposition.

And the more I observed, the more I came to appreciate the many layers of depth behind it all. Now [5773/2013] my husband jokes that I'm too religious for him!

It turns out that the fulfillment I was looking for all those years wasn't somewhere "out there." It was right inside me all the time.

As for those children I wished for at the Seder? Believe it or not, I have four just like them. I feel like a real queen and am incredibly grateful for it all.

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Source: Excerpted by Yerachmiel Tilles from "*Shabbos Stories for Parshas Va'eira 5773*" (January 12, 2012) based on an article on *Aish.com*.

Connection: This week we read the last sections of *Shmot* (Book of Exodus), which concludes with a reckoning and detailed accounting of all that was invested in fulfilling G-d's commandment to build the Sanctuary, the predecessor to the First Holy Temple in Jerusalem nearly one thousand years later. Similarly, G-d expects each of us to do a periodic spiritual account and reckoning, such as described in this story.

*Editor's note:* Stay tuned for the story of Kaila's husband and his startling encounter with the Lubavitcher Rebbe, It will be featured in story #s1320 - i.e. in two weeks!