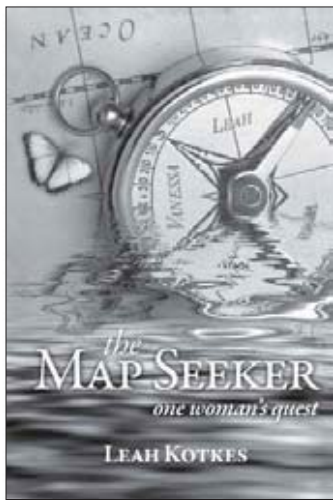


# All Directions Lead to Hashem

## "THE MAP SEEKER – ONE WOMAN'S QUEST"

Book by Leah Kotkes



REVIEWED BY: FERN SIDMAN

Leah Kotkes, a writer for Binah Magazine and mentor of Jewish women writers, takes her readers on a poignant and emotionally charged sojourn in her first book, "The Map Seeker: One Woman's Quest" (Israel Bookshop Publications). Having been asked to write this memoir by her Rav, Rabbi Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg in Jerusalem, it is clear that Mrs. Kotkes' words of faith, hope and inspiration will serve as a moral compass of sorts, to all Jewish women who seek perspective on the vicissitudes of life and the challenges that lie therein.

In highly personal and often nuanced detail, Mrs. Kotkes describes the trajectory of her life with refreshing candor as she offers a full disclosure of what is norma-

tively locked in one's heart. On her road to a Torah life, she adroitly illustrates that each soul has the power to triumph over adversity and each of us has the innate ability to grapple with painful travails if only we fortify our faith in Hashem.

Having been born into a traditional but non-religious upper middle class home in 1963, Vanessa, as she was known back then, depicts various scenarios of her home and family life in the Hendon section of London with a mixture of wonder and longing. "As a child", she recalls, "I yearned for a world more appropriate for me beyond our family home in Hendon. I prayed for a place where I belonged, where I would be appreciated, where I could be me. I hope this with all my young heart, but I had no idea where it was or how I would get there."

As adulthood emerged, her lifelong dream of assuming a career as a writer, of reporting and recording what she had seen and experienced came to fruition as she landed a job at an upscale fashion publication. The glamour, thrills and excitement of traversing the world and hob knobbing with professionals from all walks of life, soon lost its luster and Mrs. Kotkes found herself growing restless and frustrated. As she climbed the proverbial ladder of material success, she frequently changed jobs, never quite discovering what her soul longed for. With a desire to learn about other cultures

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and perhaps explore the possibilities of finding spiritual fulfillment, she spent an extended period of time in India as well as visiting a multitude of other countries. While India proved to be a captivating experience, she still felt an aching void in her tormented soul. It was there that her thoughts

turned to her own Jewish identity; and how she stood in stark contrast to the other cultures she visited.

Emotionally drained and spiritually bereft, Mrs. Kotkes returned to London.

Little did she know that through an innocuous invitation (to attend a lecture given by a neighborhood rabbi) would serve as a vehicle to a Torah true life. Through the guiding hands of Rabbi Rashi Simon, his wife Ruthie and Rabbi Yisroel and Rebbetzin Julie Roll, Mr. Kotkes became enthralled by all she learned at their Torah classes and soon began keeping Shabbos. "Each week, as I adhered more closely to more Shabbos laws and got more inspired by the spirit of the day an unusual thing happened; secular influences and temptations fell along the wayside and other more worthwhile experiences entered my life", she recalls.

Still finding herself negotiating some inner conflicts, the road she was to travel was fraught with significant hurdles. Having become cognizant of Hashem's abundant blessings throughout her life, Mrs. Kotkes' comfort came through prayer; which she clung to with a palpable zeal. Indeed, it was through heartfelt tefilla that saw her through her most difficult moments. Over her parents' objections, she decided to study in Israel, where she attended the Neve Yerushalayim seminary for women. This was a period of exponential spiritual growth for Mrs. Kotkes and while she found her classes stimulating, she felt the need to marry and have a family. It was also at this juncture that she met and established relationships with formidable figures in the frum world who would become instrumental mentors throughout her life. Among them are, Rabbi Akiva Tatz, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Horowitz, the Bostoner Rebbe, his Rebbetzin Raichel Horowitz, and Rav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg and his family who would become her personal source of Daas Torah.

Her description of the love that she felt for Eretz Yisroel and Jerusalem in particular served as the impetus for her decision to stay, rather than returning to London. After a brief and bitter marriage, she was now divorced, yet her desire to find her zivug and start a

beautiful Torah home never diminished. It is clear that this exceptionally painful period of her life and the tribulations that she faced assisted her in blossoming in to a stronger person who consistently maintained a sanguine disposition. As she personally witnessed Hashem's hashgacha pratit every step of the way, her faith in the Master of the Universe permeated her mind, heart and soul.

Her tefilla and incessant importuning of Hashem were finally answered when she met Mordechai Kotkes, the man who would become her husband. A true ben Torah, her husband is a loving man and with him at her side, she is

able to perform a panoply of chesed including the mitzvah of Hachnosas Orchim, which allows her to help others who seek to find their own personal "map" on the highway of life.

She was the recipient of Hashem's munificence once again with the birth of four sons and the ability to nurture her writing talents by contributing articles to Binah Magazine and mentoring other Jewish women writers. Yet and still, the deep pain of several miscarriages, the loss of her beloved father-in-law and managing financial hardships were personal challenges that saw her summoning up the unshakable emunah in her soul. She voices her appreciation for Hashem's blessings and assistance in all matters both large and small and her words sound a clarion call to the reader to wake up from their slumber and recognize that Hashem never abandons us.

This emotionally rife memoir will stir the hearts of women from all backgrounds and will provide the much needed succor and strength to those who are dealing with the hardships of divorce, illness, death, monetary difficulties and other such dilemmas. And for those who find themselves in a quandary about which road to take; which "map" to choose in their journey on this earth, this book will exhort you to stay the course, to never relinquish your faith in Hashem and the truth of Torah. A must read!!

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