

The Map Seeker: One Woman's Quest an Extraordinary Memoir for Jewish Women

By Leah Kotkes
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Reviewed by Y. Koppel

The Map Seeker is a captivating memoir, tracing the monumental turnaround in the life of Leah Kotkes from being Vanessa, a young British girl, from a wealthy secular family through her experiences as an accomplished career woman in London to, at the age of 28, her embrace of an authentic Torah true life of *Yiddishkeit*. The author takes us through her step by step climb to where she is today in Yerushalayim, living her life as a true *eishes chayil* under the guidance of *da'as Torah*, mentors and role models where together with her husband of 11 years has established a *bayis ne'eman b'Yisroel* raising her four wonderful *yiddisher kinderlech*.

In a true *kiyum* of *B'chol D'rochechecha Da'ehu* – Leah has used her talents and experience in the field of creative writing to bring to the chareidi literary scene high quality literature, combining both excellence in writing and Torah true values. In this capacity she is a featured writer and editor in many of the popular international *frum* magazines and conducts Writers Workshops and the Writers Journey Seminars in Yerushalayim in conjunction with which she publishes The Writer's Journal - a collection of Jewish women's writings. Leah constantly encourages women to give joy to others by sharing their writing and inspiring other women who have the gift of language and communication to utilize their talent to be *mekdadash shem shomayim*.

Her life story and memoir offers a *mussar haskel* for everyone. Regardless of the reader's position in life, from the unaffiliated, to those who are religious, and to the *heimishe* woman there is much to learn from her life's journey. Wives and daughters of true *bnei Torah* and *chassidim*, also have a tremendous amount they can learn from her memoir and life of *shteiging* - not to get caught up in the routine of our everyday existence no matter how *derhoiben* it is, but to add an extra dimension of *hislachavus* and *simchas hachaim* into the details of life.

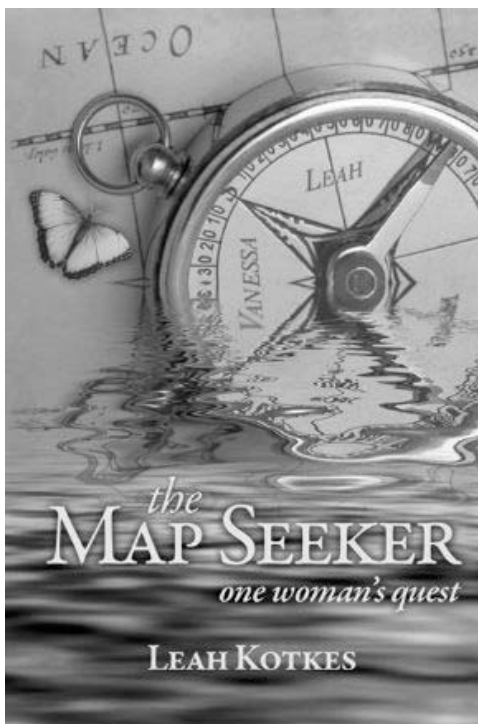
Leah makes a powerful point in her book of the special *zechus* she has to re-link to her heritage and after researching her specific background and *mesorah* has taken specific steps to try and emulate it as much as possible. She describes a visit to her secular great-uncle, an Israeli citizen as he plays with her son.

(Excerpt) *"The elderly gentleman is the son of a talmid chocham and rav who has yichus that goes back to Rashi and whose great-grandfather was a Sanzer Chassid. I smile. Only one or two links in the chain of Yiddishkeit in my family history were broken by circumstances only my Zeide and my mother know, but, I, Leah Kotkes have had the zechus to repair the chain of Yiddishkeit. My son baruch Hashem will grow up in a home of Torah and mitzvos and will have opportunities that I did not have....."Perhaps," "if" – are past. This is the future. I cannot change my grandfather's or mother's choices. I can only write my own life story. Free choice changes destinies. I am in charge of my own choices now. I can affect my future and that of my children's with my free will."*

A special lesson can be had by those of us who *baruch Hashem* have not had any break in the link of *mesorah* but nevertheless tend not to attribute enough emphasis and

importance in not changing *minhagim* and *mesorah* of *Yiddishkeit* handed down from generation to generation and here we see that a woman who has come from an outside perspective who in becoming a *ba'alas teshuva* could have chosen to affiliate herself with any group within the broad orthodox spectrum, but nevertheless sought her link to the *mesorah* of her earlier generations and purposely set on the path of repairing the link in that broken chain down to and including the nuances of a *yeshivishe/chassidishe* lifestyle. That's a powerful lesson for all of us to adhere to our individual *mesorah* to ensure that the link continues unchanged in the current generation and is maintained for future generations.

The author poignantly points out an internal conflict she encountered on a trip to



New York with the family of the Bostoner Rebbe in whose home she lived, for a *chasunah*. Leah picked up the nuances of the accepted style for the *frum* women in Boro Park.

(Excerpt) *"As we entered the wedding hall I was stunned by the scene. I felt like I had stepped into a fairy tale; each woman was dressed more beautifully than the next. Black was the dress code, but my eyes beheld black presented in every which way that was exquisite refined and feminine..... The Boro Park Chassidishe dress code was worlds apart from the unassuming, feminine clothing and head-covering favored by Orthodox women in Israel. But I never cared about what people wore at simchas in Jerusalem; all I cared about was a woman's soul, her substance. New York was something quite different. It was dazzling and dark and designer label. New York possessed a hint of something reminiscent from my London business life. When I worked in international fashion publicity I frequently flew to Milan to view the designer and haute couture fashion shows. Now I was back in a high profile city and I was excited. If this is the New York scene I am staying. Part of the "old me" missed the glamour and style of my secular life.... I was suddenly caught up in a dreamy state of imagination and ambition and a possible change of my prospects, fortune and status if I stayed in America.....I didn't consider that each woman in the room had a life in New York with its own set of Torah values. I got lost in fantastical aspirations for myself based on first impressions."*

But Leah was not complacent and aimed for the top. She was not buying into anything less than the best. She came back to Eretz Yisroel from that trip and worked very hard to gain access to Rebbes, Gedolim and Rebbetzins whose wise counsel she sought and followed through until she got to where she is today. With time she came to realize that not everything is as it appears on the surface. She took note that on her regular visits to one of her Rebbetzin/mentors, Rebbetzin Yehudis Soloveitchik (the Rebbetzin of the Rosh Yeshiva Rav Dovid Soloveitchik) she often saw the same "dazzling, dark, designer label" women with their perfect accessories who come from New York and make a visit to Rebbetzin Soloveitchik to seek her sound advice. That brought her full circle. On the one hand she gained more respect for these women, realizing that their seemingly contemporary manner of dress was not a contradiction to their overall *ehlerchkeit* and *temimus*, but more so she realized that she, a *bas bayis* by the Rebbetzin, had already reached the source of true inspiration and chose to follow a somewhat less contemporary style and way of life.

As is the case for everyone, life was not picture perfect. There were difficult years ahead, but Leah cultivated a network of friends and mentors who became and still are her support system, using their sound advice as her compass to navigate the road from a vulnerable *ba'alas teshuva* from London, to the trials of life in Yerushalayim to her status today. She continues her *kesher* with the Bostoner Rebbe and is a regular visitor at the Mattersdorf home of Rav Scheinberg, Rosh Yeshivas Torah Ohr. In fact it was Rav Scheinberg who encouraged her to share her life story with other women. Every Chanukah the Kotkes' pay a family visit to Rav Scheinberg and the Rebbetzin. On her visit nine years ago Leah already had two

children and life had changed for the good since her first visit in 1993. It was on this Chanukah visit that Rav Scheinberg told her that he would like her to write a book to tell women her story. The Rosh Yeshiva said that he was sure that it would inspire women.

(Excerpt) *"In fact, I want you to write the first chapter tonight and phone me when it is done"..... At 11.40 p.m. I called the Rosh Yeshiva, "Did you finish the first chapter?" Leah answered in the affirmative. "Well done! Keep going and have hatzlacha," was Rav Scheinberg's response.*

It took nine years to write the book, nine years of growth, nine years of experience, and nine years of joining all the points on the map into what is a truly fascinating, enlightening and most of all inspiring memoir. It is first and foremost an enjoyable read with all the subtle details and descriptions covering diverse worlds, relationships and accomplishments, but in essence it is so much more. It is a live walking talking contemporary work of *hisorerus* and reawakening. It is impossible not to walk away from Leah's memoir without reigniting the spark and the realization that every Yid has an individual relationship with the *Ribbono Shel Olam*. Reading this very revealing personal story of someone who had to come a long way and work very hard to recognize her relationship with the *Ribbono shel Olam* can be a catalyst for *hisorerus* to reignite in every one of us that dimension of our *Yiddishkeit* and we can come to the realization that every second, every minute, every hour, every day, week, month and year, we have our individual *tafkid* for being put on this earth and with this realization automatically one feels a *gevaldiger simchas hachaim* and purpose in every aspect of life.

Thank you Leah, I was inspired as I am sure that every one who reads the Map Seeker will also be inspired.