

Feature

by Liane Wakabayashi



Becoming Observant in Tokyo A Personal Shabbat Journey

Liane, Aki, Seiji, Mirai and Grandma Hiroko Wakabayashi (from left to right)
Background to photo: Original art by Liane Wakabayashi

This is the account of my journey-in-progress toward becoming Shabbos-observant in Tokyo. I have been married for 22 years to Akihiko Wakabayashi, a practitioner of Eastern medicine and an increasingly supportive student of Jewish custom and faith. In a leafy suburb in Setagaya ward, Tokyo, we raise our two children, Mirai Miriam 15 and Seiji Hillel 10. Ten kilometers away, a fast drive down Kanana Dori, the Chabad House run by Rabbi Binyomin and Efrat Edery, leads to the beginning of my story.

Becoming observant in Tokyo? How could this even be possible when I was raised in the very Jewish New York neighborhoods of Great Neck, Long Island and Forest Hills, Queens. Never for a second would I have considered the “restrictions” and the “severity” of an Orthodox Jewish life. My English-born mother and Rumanian-born father weren’t Orthodox. Their parents weren’t either. And even my parents’ grandparents’ images are captured in sepia photographs dressed in dandy Paris fashion. Yet the unbroken chain of Jewish genes was indisputable in our looks, in our behavior and in our value system. Here in Tokyo, I started to crave Jewish life and tradition like never before.

Chabad House came into our lives in 2001, shortly after 22-year old Rabbi Binyomin and his bride Efrat arrived in Tokyo. My brief foray into country living in coastal Chiba ended abruptly soon after their arrival. I packed up our household 100 kilometers away, said goodbye to the ocean and the ledge of trees in front of the mountain getaway I had called home for two years. It was now back to city life, to crowded little streets that led to the home of our new Chabad rabbi. I was so grateful for the new community they offered Tokyo with open doors, not just at holiday times and Shabbat, but any day of the week.



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As I came to know Efrat and Rabbi Binyomin, I started noticing how they balanced the financial struggles and stresses of daily life, frequent house moves, the task of aiding Jews that had been incarcerated and those that had been hospitalized. Those that they helped were able to live their lives in difficult circumstances with a bit more comfort knowing Binyomin and Efrat were both there to support them, whether this was with smiles, with Torah study, or just laughter. I saw Efrat raise a large family with such ease while my struggle to raise ‘only’ two children left me exhausted. How did Efrat do it?

I would be standing in the kitchen helping her chop a bucket of onions, a bag of potatoes, squeezing lemons, dicing carrots . . . and the clock would be ticking with only hours left before Shabbat, that moment 20 minutes before the sun goes down when candle lighting is supposed to take place. I would race home, pick up my kids from school, then make the half hour trip back to Chabad just in time to light candles. Some Shabbats I’d be successful. And often times I missed the boat. I found it an almighty struggle just to get the timing right.

But Efrat, besides cooking for at least 25 people each week, would also prepare meals ‘to go’ for kosher visitors to Japan, homeschool her own children, answer endless emails, relay messages back and forth with Binyomin and seamlessly adjust and adjust to whatever challenges took priority that day. Despite the endless emails, the weekly email newsletter to compose, and a relentless vacationless schedule, Efrat would always find time to speak one to one with anyone who needed her.

And then she would pause for Shabbat candle-lighting at precisely the perfect time.

There had to be an engine running this superhuman activity with a capacity that allowed her to do it all with precision and with a smile. My first step toward “observancy” was just that: observing how all this activity in the weekdays would come to a natural halt on the eve of Shabbat. I observed how Efrat and Rabbi Binyomin appeared just as “busy” as ever, leading song and prayer at Shabbat meals, the discussion of the weekly Torah parsha, the davening from prayer books, and striking up conversations in at least 4 different languages with out of town guests.

I began to observe how every Shabbat has its own rhythm. I gradually learned to see the beauty in deterring my own cravings to check emails on the iphone. I slowly came to enjoy ignoring relentless to-do-lists just for a day and trust that whatever great urgent matter I was in the midst of attending to could wait until after Shabbat.

I discovered that the prayers sung at the start of Shabbat have a mysteriously feminine slant. What did this mean? In L’ha Dohdi we would welcome the “Shabbat bride.” In the *Eshet Chayil* prayer we praise the chief keeper of the

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Jewish home, the wife, for running her household with love and compassion. In the early days, I didn't understand why Shabbat would be called a "bride" when we didn't on balance recognize the Shabbat "groom." I talked this over with my husband Aki, who is well versed in Eastern philosophy's yin-yang principles of complementary but opposing energies, the "yang" -- the pushing, striving, creative energy that drives forward the workweek and the 'yin' of Shabbat, a calming-down energy that rises as the sun sets on Friday night. As I started taking this Shabbat bride analogy to heart, it became easy to turn off one electronic gadget after another. In its place I experienced how Shabbat peacefully opens a door onto a new state of mind where I yield my own agenda to a higher will, the will to rest and see rest as a gift, a supremely life-affirming, healthy gift. The door opens to the Shabbat

table, to laughter and conversation, to bowls heaped with salads. And after the meal, in the long slow hours before sundown, Shabbat could become quite boring at moments. This too was a gift: to see boredom as a chance to observe my reactions to surroundings without constantly being busy. I discovered the pleasure of taking a walk with nothing in my pockets, just an open mind to stop and pause before a beautiful garden or an ancient tree that I would normally miss in the rush to always get somewhere.

An overarching principle in traditional Eastern medicine, from which natural healing occurs, is that you get well, first and foremost, by making lifestyle adjustments that require small sacrifices and self-regulation. To change eating patterns or sleeping routines, you have to change your mind. By correcting what led to physical imbalance in the

first place, you come to appreciate how lifestyle adjustments to diet, to sleeping patterns, to work and exercise routines are not really much of a sacrifice at all, but rather can be seen as a gift that add years, if not decades, to a life well lived.

I scrutinized my lifestyle. There's no doubt that I'm a pusher. If I can't find time to do what needs doing in the daytime I would burn the midnight oil, working until one or two am. I would cram as many hours as possible under the harsh light and opaque radiation of the computer. I was multitasking for sure, tutoring my kids while dinner boiled in pots on the stove, taking phone calls with a free hand while stroking an Absynian cat with the other. And I was doing this six days a week. The seventh was a break in routine—but it wasn't quite Shabbat, although it looked like a pretty good facsimile.

I complained to Efrat that no matter how much time I spent at Chabad House there always seemed to be a glass wall between their lives and mine. We were occupying the same space, doing the same activities, but the energy or consciousness behind the acts was so different. Shabbat involved driving or taking buses and trains and always the nervous tension that comes from facing traffic or crowded public transportation. Being out of walking range from Chabad House, I just could not figure out how to make Shabbat one continuous night and day of rest, a full day of recharge for not just me but the children and Aki too.

In Tokyo, where you can count observant Jews on two hands, the arrival of a new family can have meteoric impact, as it did for us with the arrival of



Rabbi Daniel and Yael Aldrich in Tokyo half a year ago. Their spacious home was set up generously to accommodate guests for Shabbat. We were invited repeatedly to experience Shabbat as they experienced it—attending Shabbat services in the beautiful new shul opened by the Chabad House run by Rabbi Mendy and Chana Sudakevich. Experiencing many kinds of Shabbats with different families, even different rabbis, led me to the realization that every family creates its own Shabbat rhythm and over time I would need to as well. Strolling the streets with empty pockets and no wallets, a day of singing and prayer, one colorful plate of hamishy Mediterranean food after the other, my kids look a bit sad now when Shabbat finally comes to an end at the Aldrich house.

Growing up in a Jewish household where my mother lit Shabbat candles and prepared a festive meal, I didn't know how to incorporate the "add-ons". I saw them as unfamiliar customs. The beautiful melodic prayers before the meal, the washing of the hands before eating, the *Birkat Hamazon* prayers after the meal. . . I didn't have the confidence to replicate this Shabbat experience at home and in truth, having a Japanese husband who was supportive and happy to make Jewish life the heart of our household, I was nonetheless alone here, challenged to do every step of it myself. I was distracted by the overwhelming urge to create Shabbat perfection rather than Shabbat peace. Family Shabbat dinners at home might quickly deteriorate into shouting matches as family members would choose to bring grievances they had been bottling up all week to the Friday night table. Or the next morning we'd be volleying emotions and my child's insistence on watching a television program called *Battle Spirit* could set off yet another household drama.

What I had to learn, and I'm still learning, is to honor Shabbat as a day when thematic family issues and verbal provocations are

set aside. If someone's not pitching in to help set the table, let it slide. If someone arrives half an hour late to the family dinner table, holding up the start of the meal, so be it.

Every week now, I see tiny adjustments in the right direction. The routine remains the same but what changes is the level of refinement we bring to peace in the household. I negotiate with my son for a tape recorder so we are able to turn off Saturday morning television forever. By the time we are ready to buy the recording machine, my son had lost interest in *Battle Spirit* altogether and he came to the conclusion that television is not necessary on Shabbat. He has found another game, chess, which he was introduced by Rabbi Binyomin and Efrat's chess-loving sons. Together on Shabbat afternoon the children hone their skills in order to be the first to cry out checkmate! Seiji is now so excited to refine his chess skills that he has persuaded his *Battle Spirit* loving classmates to switch to his new game too.

Every week, bit-by-bit, we add a refinement. One week we're eating kosher chicken, tasty, mouthwatering and so unlike the store bought chicken we usually eat. So after a few months of eating kosher chicken the family consensus is to only eat kosher chickens. Just as we make this decision, we find out Chabad is out of chicken and it will be months before kosher chicken is again available in Tokyo. But our family resolve is already unanimous, and so life goes on as vegetarians, at least until kosher chickens become available again.

We are still on this journey of refining Shabbat and where we need most strength and resolve is in the communication. It helps me to think of Shabbat as a 25 hour cruise on a ship that our family enjoys together, with good people we know, with people we are just getting to know, with strangers we will exchange emails and addresses with at the end of a brief but unforgettable Shabbat together.

Every week, Shabbat is unique. The meals have a different flavor, new faces, a different spiritual message. At the Aldrich dining table, we read the weekly Parsha, the Torah portion. It will be discussed at lunch, debated, challenged, a source of nachas as the kids relate their questions about the Parsha to their own sweet lives. Finally there's *Havdallah*, the beautiful closing ceremony that takes us back to the shore of everyday busy life.

And thus ends another trip on our 'Tokyo Shabbat cruise ship'. We've had to hop on board at candle-lighting time Friday night and stay on board until the ship returns to "shore" an hour after sunset, taking us back to the port of our busy weekday lives with a fresh mind, and clarity about what takes top priority.

The lights go on. The vacuum cleaner gets plugged in. The computer is switched on. The cell phone hums to announce a phone call. The race to juggle two children's busy school life routines at opposite ends of Tokyo, the responsibilities of writing and running my own art school, my husband's requests for support as he takes over his late father's work in property management—all of it is back again to embrace us as a new week begins. ✧

Liane Grunberg Wakabayashi is a teacher and innovator of a Tokyo-based intuitive art workshop called the Genesis Way. Liane has lived in Japan for 25 years and is married to Akihiko Wakabayashi, a practitioner of Eastern medicine. To find out more about Liane, her art and writings, see www.genisiscards.com

To read Liane's memoir, *The Wagamama Bride* see <http://www.lianewakabayashi.com>. To find out more about Liane's intuitive art workshops see: <http://www.genisiscards.com>