

This Jewish American Life

December 12, 2010

By Gary Tepfer

Good Shabbos.

This evening I would like to talk and reminisce about our Jewish community and synagogue over a span of more than 50 years. Most of our community has come to Eugene more recently and I thought it would be interesting to go back in time and connect the past to the present.

I owe my earliest Jewish awareness and sense of identity to my parents who in spite of some ambiguous feelings about 'organized religion', considered it important to observe Jewish holidays, provide a Jewish education to their children, and to belong to the small synagogue and community of Jews in Eugene in 1955. This sounds easy to us today, but it wasn't then. We were relatively poor and coming up with the dues was a hardship. My father had been driven from the University of Arizona by overt anti-Semitism and he knew that it was common here, too, in those days. He made his Jewishness known in part by joining the synagogue. Recently, Richard Littman, a Professor Emeritus of Psychology at the UO, told me that my father was "the first out of the closet Jew at the UO." My parent's reaction to oppression was to fight back, to join, to belong.

Temple Beth Israel in those days was quite different from the full service institution that we have and take for granted today. The building on Portland Street was new and there was a mortgage to be paid. All services were led by Temple members who also taught the Sunday school. Preparation for Bar Mitzvah was also done by the few people in the community capable of teaching the prayers and liturgy. There is no comparison to the relatively complete curriculum available to our students today.

In addition to services, Temple Beth Israel served as a place for social gatherings. My parents taught Israeli and ballroom dancing. Holidays were observed much as today. There were latke parties, breakfasts, casino nights as well as many other social gatherings. The biggest fund raiser of the year was the Sisterhood rummage sale, which made on average \$150, a big shot in the arm for the Temple budget.

A big step was taken in about 1959 when Rabbi Markus Simmons was hired. The Rabbi and his wife Beatrice became the backbone of the religious school, and the Rabbi led all religious services and conducted life cycle events. I have fond memories of sitting beside Mrs. Simmons during Friday night services, following her finger across the page, listening to her enunciate the Hebrew words. This is how I learned to read Hebrew and recite prayers. Rabbi Simmons was a serious and respected scholar as well, something not appreciated in our community at the time. This community wasn't united on the need for a rabbi at all and unfortunately, from my perspective, Rabbi Simmons wasn't rehired.

We muddled along for a few years until Rabbi Louis Neimand was hired. There were some objections to the hiring of Rabbi Neimand because he had a police record. What for? ... for being a freedom marcher in the civil rights movement, a badge of courage as far as I was concerned.

Rabbi Neimand prepared me for Bar Mitzvah and in the process we had many discussions about social justice and especially the escalating war in Vietnam. I became increasingly involved in the war protest movement and Rabbi Neimand taught me about the Jewish context for passivism and opposition to war. This made it easy for him to write a letter to my draft board when I turned 18, stating that my convictions were heartfelt and not opportunistic. In spite of a near perfect record of rejecting conscientious objector status to those who applied, I succeeded thanks in part to Rabbi Neimand.

The next two decades saw terrific growth in the Eugene Jewish community. Temple Beth Israel membership in the 1950's was mostly Jewish merchants and their families. During the 1960's and 70's our membership grew to include more professionals: doctors, lawyers, teachers, professors, and civil employees.

In August 1976 Rabbi Neimand died tragically of a heart attack. My fellow music student at the UO, then known as Ed Hankin and his friend Aryeh Hirschfield, stepped in and voluntarily ran services. These two young men brought a lively spirit as well as new tunes to our services and this helped hold us together during this tough period of grief. They kept things going until we were able to hire a young rabbi from the mid-west, Myron Kinberg.

Rabbi Kinberg was a social activist. Under his leadership we recognized and finally supported the need for a two state solution in the Middle East. He awakened us to the plight of the Ethiopian Jews and the need to offer them a safe haven in Israel. He taught us of the need to accept and welcome same sex couples into our community. Rabbi Kinberg was ahead of his time on all of these social and political issues. His moral leadership and social conscience transformed us as a community and as individuals. During this period we were able to bring Yitzhak Husbands-Hankin onto our staff, first as a teacher and head of the religious school, then as Cantor and Rabbi. Rabbi Husbands-Hankin grew with us and our needs, becoming ordained as a Rabbi and Cantor.

I had the pleasure of being president of Temple Beth Israel with both of these wonderful men, and shared the joys and sorrows that are the daily work of our clergy. I learned so much from them, about how being Jewish is part and parcel of living, not simply something that gets segregated into a compartment, but is all around us all of the time.

One highlight of my experience was being able to integrate two of my disparate worlds, my photographic work in Arizona on the Navaho Indian Reservation, with my Jewishness. Shonna Husbands-Hankin went on one of my week long trips to Canyon de Chelly in Arizona, where she got a view of modern Navaho life and how it was integrated into the Red Rock canyons of Canyon de Chelly. She got to know our hosts and guides, Dorothy and Chauncey Neboyia and their grandson, Daniel Staley. Shonna and Yitz came back the next year. I will never forget hearing

the voices of Rabbi Yitz and Daniel Staley bounce off the Red Rock sandstone, where their prayers were able to echo and reverberate through the canyon. The following year we organized a trip around Shabbat B'reisheet with Shonna and Yitz's tribe, and Navaho teachers, Chauncey Neboyia, Daniel Staley, and Harry Walters. Here we read the beginning of our creation story from a parchment Torah in a natural stone amphitheater below ancient Anasazi pictographs and petroglyphs. New and old traditions blended with a landscape that enhanced the telling of the story. Chauncey was in his 90's then and I asked him what he thought of the group. He responded: "those people sure know how to pray." This is the highest praise from a medicine man. Chauncey died a few years ago at the age of 103. Dorothy died recently at 100 years of age. I feel so fortunate to have shared a small part of their lives, and to have shared a part of my Jewish life with them.

To conclude I would like to bring us up to the present. For me, in most respects we are living in the best of times here at Temple Beth Israel. We have the luxury of a lovely new building that services all of our needs. With Rabbi Husbands-Hankin and Rabbi Harris we are served by two wonderful clergymen who inspire us spiritually, morally, and intellectually. They are there for us when we need them, from birth to grave. We have the best religious school in our history and a growing adult education program. A wonderful and dedicated TBI office staff keeps the Temple running smoothly. Members of our congregation take time out of their busy lives to serve as Board officers and Trustees; others serve on committees, lead book groups, make hospital visits, or bring cultural events to the synagogue. These are a few of the many things that our members do for us and we owe them a big thank you for their service.

There is one area that still needs the most work and it will take sacrifice on our parts ... that is the financial well-being of the synagogue. We are now saddled with a two million dollar mortgage and a balloon payment looming. Years and years of fundraising for the building has left other areas neglected. Shoestring finances wears down the best employees and demoralizes the institution. This is an area we must improve if we want to maintain what we have and move forward in the future. It will require greater giving on our parts and reaching out to new members to join us.

I feel fortunate to have inherited from those who came before me a rich and wonderful tradition and to have had the opportunity to be a part of this community. I am proud to say that Jewish life has grown and flourished here in Eugene in my lifetime.