

Shabbat Shalom.

Thanks to TBI, the Rabbis, and Nina for inviting me to share with you my American Jewish journey.

It is more accurate to say "our" journey because I have shared most of it with my high school sweet heart, Leslie. We celebrated our 40 year anniversary this past October. We have experienced together the challenges presented by our Jewish faith and the comfort and the joy it has given us through the years.

My personal American Jewish journey began before I met Leslie and even before I was born and in another country. It began in 1924, when my mother, Adeline Karger, was born in Leipzig, Germany. She was the only child of Abraham Karger and Paula Rimalova, my grandparents. My grandfather was born in Shnehav, Poland and immigrated to Germany when he was a young man. My grandmother was born in Leipzig of Polish descent.

My grandfather was a furrier in Leipzig and the family was solidly middle class. And then in 1933, Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany and everything changed. The Nuremberg Laws were enacted, which among other things, called for boycotts of Jewish businesses, deprived Jews of German citizenship, and resulted in wide-spread vandalism of Jewish property and assaults on the Jewish population.

What little my mother has been willing to share is she attended a secular private school where each morning the students had to say "Heil Hitler" and give the Nazi salute. She was kicked out because she was Jewish.

My grandfather saw the handwriting on the wall. He liquidated his property into fungible items like jewelry and cash and the family left behind everything else. They traveled through Europe for 6 months trying to find for a country that would issue them an exit visa to the U.S. They were unsuccessful in Czechoslovakia where they waited for months before finding their way to Antwerp and passage to the United States where aunts and uncles had immigrated, arriving in NYC in December 1938. One month after Kristallnacht.

My mother was traumatized by her experience and it has been difficult to get her to talk about this time of her life. My parents traveled in Europe extensively but my mother insisted that they never visit a German-speaking country.

My identification as a Jew has always been connected to my mother's escape from Germany. I am an American Jew because my grandfather had the foresight to get out before the Nazis sent Jews to the extermination camps. I am American Jew because they immigrated to the U.S. and not to Palestine. I am an American Jew most of all because they survived as have the Jewish people since biblical times.

My mother met my father who was a private in the Army in 1944. They were married in 1945 shortly before the war in Europe ended.

I was born in Brooklyn in 1950, we moved to Long Island in 1956 shortly after my sister was born. My father was a textile salesman, back when clothing was made in the U.S. His biggest account was J.C. Penney and he made a very nice living.

Our neighborhood was predominately Jewish although the community was diverse. The public high school and Jr. H.S. we attended was a mix of Jews, Italian and Irish Catholics, and African-Americans. We got along for the most part although there was racial and religious tension from time to time. After all, this was a time before Vatican II when the Catholic Church decreed that Jews were not responsible for the death of Christ and rejected displays of anti-Semitism. And the murder of MLK in 1968 followed by riots in many American cities made for some uneasy moments at our H.S. Fortunately, nothing more serious than fist fights occurred.

We belonged to a reformed synagogue. The thing I remember most about services at our synagogue is the men did not wear tallitot and few wore kippot. I have a photo album of my bar mitzvah. I wore neither. I found my religious Jewish experience to be unfulfilling and walked away from it when I was 13 years old.

I was not brought up in a religious home. We did not keep kosher, never lit candles on Shabbat, although we did attend services on the high holy days. I have thought about my parent's disconnection from religious Judaism and can only conclude that after surviving the Great Depression, the Shoah, and the War, economic prosperity was their priority. They both experienced anti-Semitism in their lives and the best way to overcome it was not to attend shul but to work long hours, as my father did, and provide a safe, financially secure place for the family. Nonetheless, they had a strong cultural Jewish identity. Jewish comedians such as Groucho Marx, Mel Brooks, and Woody Allen, among others, were staples in our home.

I have fond memories of my paternal grandfather, who was a dentist. He was a cigar smoker, a habit that my grandmother detested. Although my grandmother banned cigar smoking in the apartment, my grandfather hid his partially smoked cigars in the communal ash tray by the elevator, which he would retrieve before taking one of his frequent walks. One of his favorite sayings, which he often used when my grandmother pushed him around a bit was - "life is just a bowl of cherries, but why do I only get the pits?"

My father had a gallows sense of humor when the subject of Hitler, Germany and the Nazis came up. He meant no harm but he liked to joke, in front of my mother, that Hitler did not kill himself in that bunker in Berlin, that he was hiding somewhere in South America, and in a fake-German accent said that any day now he's coming back. My sister and I laughed at his pretend German accent but my mother never appreciated the humor. This is how some Jews dealt with this subject, with humor. Mel Brooks come to mind in "The Producers" and the fictional "Spring Time For Hitler and Germany."

Leslie and I met in H.S. and attended college in Washington D.C. I had heard a rumor that contrary to that famous New Yorker cartoon, there was life beyond the Hudson River and New Jersey. Leslie decided to go along with my crazy idea of leaving the East Coast and we moved to Denver, CO. We were married in Cedarhurst, New York on October 15, 1972 at a restaurant, which we were to find out 25 years later, was owned by the uncle of Adam Bernstein, who owned Adam's Place here in Eugene. And we were married by Cantor David Benedict, who played the rabbi that married Ali McGraw and Richard Benjamin in the movie Goodbye Columbus.

I learned after a few months in Denver that my degree in Political Science did not have potential employers banging down my door so I applied to law school. I chose the University of San Diego, after Leslie keenly observed, during a visit in March, 1972, that the temperature was 72 degrees, you could see the Pacific Ocean from campus, and the students wore shorts to class.

Little did we know that in this paradise we were soon to discover and experience something that would reconnect us to Judaism in a most difficult and painful way.

In 1978, a friend suggested that we go to local synagogue for a Tay-Sachs screening. Tay-Sachs is a recessive genetic disorder which means that when both parents are carriers there is a 25 % chance of giving birth to an affected child in any given pregnancy. The defective gene is most common in the Ashkenazi Jewish Population. One in every 27 is a carrier.

The technical description of what happens to a Tay-Sachs child is the defective gene prevents the body from producing a protein that breaks down a chemical in the nerve tissue. Without this protein, the chemical builds up in the nerve cells in the brain.

A Tay-Sachs child appears normal for the first 6 months after birth. Then, as nerve cells become distended, a decline of physical and mental abilities begins. Death usually occurs before the age of 4. There is no cure. Tay-Sachs is always fatal.

So, you probably know where this is going. Leslie and I were carriers. We went to counseling. We learned that through amniocentesis at 21 weeks, the child could be tested in utero. The odds were discussed. What we heard was we had a 75 % chance of having a healthy child. Good odds, right? Well, to quote the great singer and songwriter Ray Charles - "If we didn't have bad luck, we'd have no luck at all."

We had not one, not two, but three positive Tay-Sachs pregnancies in a row within a 2 year period. We chose to terminate each pregnancy. Leslie went through 3 labors and deliveries, not to mention the mental anguish of not knowing prior to amnio whether she was carrying a Tay-Sachs child, waiting 3 weeks for the amnio results and after finding out that it was a Tay-Sachs pregnancy, experiencing the wait until induced delivery.

Leslie and I viewed our experiences quite differently as we picked up the pieces of 3 unsuccessful attempts to start a family the conventional way. I tended to agree with Albert Einstein's observation that insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. Leslie, on the other hand, usually not the stubborn one in our relationship, drew inspiration from our matriarch Sarah and decided we were going to keep trying even if she had to wait until she was 90 years old to become a mother.

Well, fate intervened because we developed an infertility problem which was probably a blessing because Leslie needed a break from being pregnant. We experienced the joys of infertility counseling and testing, which for me included a Woody Allen-esque moment when I was directed to appear at an infertility clinic early one Sunday morning where a not so sympathetic nurse handed me a plastic cup, pointed to a rack holding a variety of magazines designed for lonely men, and pointed me in the direction of a cold, antiseptic men's room. I'll spare you the rest of that story.

With infertility complicating things, we turned to another way to start a family - adoption. I concluded that the world would survive without a biological replica of me. Adoption was something Leslie always was interested in pursuing. We chose the private adoption path and connected with a pregnant 15 year old girl. We communicated with her indirectly and later learned she chose us because of Leslie. In 1984, she gave birth, and 6 hours later we were holding our son Eric. I noticed that he had bruises on his face from a difficult labor and delivery. Here we were, Leslie and I, emotionally battered and bruised, holding this physically bruised new-born who was about to become our son. It seemed so symbolic.

Life was good. We were parents. We had fun with strangers asking us where Eric got his blond hair and blue eyes. Leslie enjoyed strangers complimenting her about how thin she looked after having just had a baby. And Eric was a wonderful baby. Our families loved him. Our friends were supportive.

And then when Eric was about 12 months old, Leslie called me. I think the conversation went something like this: "Guess What?", "What", "I'm pregnant", "How the heck did that happen", "The regular way".

I am not known for being an optimist but I had a different feeling about this one. Eric was our good luck charm. Just to be sure we went to a different doctor, Michael Kayback at UCLA Harbor General, who helped discover the defective gene which enabled the screening for Tay-Sachs. Leslie had been in touch Dr. Kayback even before we became pregnant again. He knew our story and encouraged Leslie not to give up. Not that she needed any encouragement.

Dr. Kayback did the amnio. He had perfected a process that gave preliminary results, 99 percent accurate, in 48 hours rather than waiting for 3 weeks. He called us with the news. It was good.

But we had one more obstacle to overcome. Since Leslie had been induced to deliver early three times previously, there was a concern that she would go into labor prematurely. An exam determined her cervix was 50 percent effaced. A cerclage was surgically attached, Leslie was put on medication to prevent premature labor, and placed on bed rest for the duration of the pregnancy - 4 1/2 months. Thankfully, this worked and in 1986, our second beautiful Child, Evan was born at 39 weeks.

Our Jewish identity was reignited by parenthood. We joined a synagogue in San Diego and when the opportunity came to move to Eugene, one of the first things we did was find out whether there was a synagogue in town. Thankfully, there was. TBI connected me with Sheldon

Rubin who was generous with his time during many telephone conversations and shared with me what it was like living in Eugene. We decided to come although I had to convince Leslie that there was not that much rainfall in Oregon. I did some research and determined that the average was 40 inches per year. Our first winter here we had record rainfall - 90 inches!

Despite the gloomy weather, Eugene turned about to be a great place to raise our sons. They attended religious school at TBI, Rabbi Yitz presided over their bar mitzvahs, they were educated by wonderful teachers such as Ben Spratt, now Rabbi Ben Spratt, Sharon Eidelberg-Spratt, and Michael and Michelle Saul., and Joan Baylis. Unlike their father, they continued their Jewish education through confirmation (begrut).

Eric is now married and living in Portland with his wife Trudy. He has a degree in economics from UO and is now back in school seeking another degree in computer science. Trudy is studying to be a dental assistant. We were blessed that Rabbi Yitz presided over their wedding.

Evan graduated from USC film school, lives in Los Angeles, and is pursuing a career in film making. Leslie, ever the optimist, just knows that one day he will be thanking his parents after accepting an Oscar.

Recently, my Jewish Journey has led me to chair the Jewish Community Relations Council which among other things is charged with the responsibility of defending Israel in this community. I am involved because Israel often is demonized, delegitimized and held to a double standard in the local media, on campus, and at Eugene landmarks like the Saturday Market. Often with little push back from the Jewish community, myself included, until a few years ago.

I have asked myself: Why are so many Jews in this community indifferent about Israel? Is it that Israel is no longer that endearing underdog that so many Jews were attached to in the first decades of its existence? Or is it that our community has become so comfortable with being Jewish in North America that we believe that we would continue to flourish even if Israel disappeared?

Rabbi Daniel Gordis, in his recent book, *The Promise of Israel*, argues that the Jewish people cannot survive in any meaningful way as a people, as a nation, without a state. He believes it is the existence of a Jewish state that allows American Jewry to flourish intellectually, culturally and religiously, and he warns that "American Jewish life as it now exists would not survive the loss of Israel." "Without Israel, the self-confidence and sense of belonging that American Jews now take for granted would quickly disappear."

I have come to believe that Israel is essential to the continued thriving of Jews in the diaspora. Not to mention the safe harbor it offers to Jews in jeopardy in places like France, Turkey and Iran.

Israel has survived military wars, terror wars and boycotts. The question is whether it can survive its greatest threat yet, those who use words to convince the world that it is an illegitimate enterprise that has no right to exist.

My American Jewish Journey will continue to lead me down the path of speaking out. To defend Israel's right to exist as the nation state of the Jewish people. And to be a nudge and to encourage others in this community to speak out by staffing our JCRC Israel table at the Saturday Market, and writing letters to the Register-Guard or Eugene Weekly when Israel is unfairly attacked in those publications. I hope you will make this effort part of your American Jewish journey.

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