I was born in Brooklyn Jewish hospital. My parents had only recently moved to Danbury Connecticut, and my mother wasn't about to trust a hospital outside of New York City. In addition, my birth on November 30, 1947 coincided with the U.N. declaration to partition Palestine in order to create the state of Israel. So it seems like it was in the stars for me to be engaged with Judaism or Israel one way or the other throughout my life.

I'm going to talk a little more about my parents and grandparents later. Growing up, I spent most of my time outside of public school, at the shul, For my Bat Mitzvah ceremony, I led the Friday night service, and talked about my belief that God is the spark of potential in everyone. My sister Noni, two years younger than I, was the first girl at our shul allowed to read from the Torah.

My Hebrew teacher, Mrs. Turk, was a school psychologist and wasn't above using behavioral modification. For example, reciting the V'ahavta prayer in less than 60 seconds would reap the prize of a 6-inch blackberry Table Talk pie. But beyond the prizes, the sheer quality of her presence conveyed love of Hebrew and love of her students. I became a teacher as an adult and in large part because of Mrs. Turk I knew-- a classroom at its best is a place of safety, challenge, and laughter.

Our rabbi was also a huge formative presence in my childhood, for good and for bad. His liberal sermons provoked controversy, but even the nay-sayers were proud that our small town had a rabbi of such intellectual stature. I remember him in his black robes—white on the High Holidays-- standing tall on a bima quite a bit higher than the sanctuary pews, waving his index finger in the air, booming out the words of Jeremiah or Isaiah while railing against national and local civil rights injustices and moral apathy. His impassioned sermons shaped me powerfully. In college, when I was the only one of my roommates to leave the dorm the night a sit-in was called to support students who'd been rebuffed again in their efforts to establish a Black Studies program, I'm sure I was hearing Rabbi Malino in my head

Although he made it a point to know all the children in the community, the rabbi was not a warm or forgiving person and he favored the children who were seen as the smart ones. I was among the favored few, and it was not an entirely good feeling. This sense of being a chosen one, along with the concept of Jews as the

chosen people, was sometimes satisfying, but also confusing and uncomfortable. I'm not sure of the long term impact of these feelings, but except for two summers as a counselor at a Reform camp in the Berkshire Mountains, I left behind for 15 years or more not my Jewish values but organizational and spiritual involvement with Judaism. It took living on the Navajo reservation and later coming out as a lesbian to bring me back to the powerful sense of Jewish identity that was central to my childhood.

I did marry my Jewish boyfriend from college. As graduate students in Santa Cruz California, we were part of a politically active community, with whom we shared seders most years. Otherwise, though, Judaism and things Jewish were not important to us. Much later in life, I realized that because our family histories and cultures *were* so familiar to each other, I could have the Jewish part of myself reflected back to me every day in the ten years we were together, without paying any dues. This un-thoughtful way of being Jewish *was* still a *way of being Jewish*, and at an emotional level it substituted just fine for conscious participation in an organized Jewish community.

In the late 1970s I fell in love with a close friend, a member of our political collective, who did NOT return the feeling. Suffice it to say here, since I have so much else I also want to say, that after about three years of much confusion and misery, including an agonizing decision to terminate a pregnancy, I left our marriage.

In the months following, while completing a literature degree, I was drawn into the cycle of Navajo legends that describe the origins of their healing ceremonies, and I found I couldn't stop reading them. Again, I don't have time to describe here how they were helping to heal *me*-- but they were healing. I could also feel how these stories grew right out of the land, and eventually I determined to visit the reservation and experience that landscape. I ended up living there for almost two years.

The Dine, or Navajo, cherish Dinetah, *their* desert land in what is now northeastern Arizona, and they cherish the complex oral tradition, which (along with the land) defines them as a people-- in certain ways very similarly to the ways our own rich cycle of stories is the backbone of *our* peoplehood as Jews. These similarities

started to dawn on me the last six months of my stay there, when I lived with a family and often herded their sheep in the desert at the base of the Lukachukai Mountains. (For those of you who have been there, it's about an hour from Chinle.) The Dine mother and teacher, who was the head of that household, knew about the Holocaust-- telling me soon after we met that she knew my people had experienced our own Long Walk, the Dine name for the period of greatest suffering in *their* history. In the wake of that conversation, but moreso under the influence of their storied desert landscape, I celebrated a seder for this family that was giving me a home.

Just as I was returning to California from the reservation in 1982 the Lebanon war broke out-- the first Israeli war that provoked significant dissent among soldiers-- and soon the Sabra and Chatilla massacres were in the headlines. Back in Santa Cruz, the beauty of the high southwest desert still reverberated inside me, sparking a curiosity to experience my own people's desert land. Combined with the shock of the news of the war, I was awakened to a concern for Israel and engagement with its fate that I hadn't felt since learning the songs of the Chalutzim in Sunday school.

Also around this time I met the woman who became my lover and partner for a long long time. She was *not* Jewish. But that coming home propelled me into a need to uncover whatever *other* parts of myself I may have buried or never explored. My interest in Israel opened up into a near obsession with reading first about the Holocaust—and then about the lives, and not only the deaths, of European Jewry.

I had never learned very much from my family or my Sunday School teachers about the world that shaped the colorful, forceful, loving, sturdy, and maddening characters of my grandparents and the children they raised. The focus at the shul was almost entirely Biblical and modern Israel. These two narratives—the Torah stories on one hand, and on the other, the founding of the modern Jewish state-- were vividly imprinted in me year after year through story and song. Except for the Golden Age in Spain, other times and places in Jewish history were depicted quite lifelessly. I learned about the yeshivas established for rabbinical scholars in Vilna, but little about Kiev where my grandmother Esther was born, or what experiences prepared *her* mother to run a candy shop out of their home in Yonkers,

or whether my mother's parents, Anna and Aaron actually lived *within* the big cities with the funny names of Minsk and Pinsk or in the surrounding rural provinces of the same names. The Yiddish all four of my grandparents had spoken was taken for granted by everyone. I didn't find out until *after* my father suddenly died that he had spoken no English until he entered first grade. To the staff at my Sunday school, Yiddish had almost no value compared to Hebrew, and, like Ladino, another language spoken by Diaspora Jews, it was virtually untaught. I countered this attitude with little natural curiosity of my own. I absorbed the impression that Jewish existence had sailed through the atmosphere from Moses to Ben Gurion in an air bubble, marked by a suffering called Exile, and kept aloft by Hebrew prayers.

It was music that drew me into Yiddish. I had finally traveled to Israel the summer after I came out; and I had begun participating in Jewish feminist gatherings in the Bay Area. By chance I started playing Yiddish folk songs on a borrowed accordion. Pretty soon I wanted to know the translation of those Yiddish lyrics, and my world opened up even more. Though new to the accordion and to Yiddish, I knew these weren't passing interests. I knew they would claim me and sustain me for the rest of my life. This was all happening close to the time that I turned 40, and I really did feel that life begins at 40.

When the history of Yiddish speaking Jews in Eastern Europe started to come alive for me through their literature, a strange and wonderful thing happened. I had always lived mostly in my head, and now I felt that my existence as a diaspora Jew anchors me to the earth. I grew roots. Through Yiddish stories and memoirs, my imagination took hold of scenes like these-- Jewish women bathing and doing laundry in a village mill stream, exhausted workers in a matso factory gossiping in the last hours of their overtime shift, Zionist or Bundist youth at a forest gathering outside of a shtetl, away from their parents' eyes, or a Jewish widow standing amidst the sheaves of wheat in her own farm eyeing a coming storm. It was new for me to imagine my forbears in these ways, and not only as victims of pogroms or nostalgic stereotypes.

In addition to these scenes of secular life in Yiddish literature, the religious lives of women took on complexity and came alive. My eyes grew wide when I read in the Tsena U'Rena, or Taytsh Chumesh, known as the Women's Bible, that Sarah, a healer whose tent had been open to all throughout her long years, closed up shop

forever in her shock at Isaac's near sacrifice. This was woman-identified midrash in Yiddish, and I wonder to this day whether my mother's grandmother, who was said to be too religious to follow her children to the New World, was literate enough and lucky enough to spend a few minutes in a chair reading the Taytsh Chumesh on Shabbos, as many women did. I never got to ask my grandmother this question about her mother, or any other specific questions. When I did ask for a story, she would say, "oy, what's to tell? It's too painful to tell." But I can't help wondering if knowing some Yiddish other than *schmaltz* or *schlemiel* might have helped me frame questions to her that would have helped her believe someone *could* bear witness to the world that shaped her.

What I learned through Yiddish literature helped to explain the silences in my Jewish education, at home and at Sunday school. After my father finished dental school and served his army stint in Texas and Japan, he set up his practice in Danbury. My parents found themselves in a landscape of New England hills, factory smokestacks, and Catholic cathedrals and parochial schools. The recent Shoah was a silent but looming shadow. In those years no one was speaking of it yet, unless you lived in a survivor community. McCarthyism was also alive and well across the land. My parents became good citizens, committed to Jewish survival, but also to the American dream, hoping that Noni and I would grow up to lead happy, comfortable lives and not draw attention to ourselves for the wrong reasons.

So between the silences at home and at Sunday school, I was left ignorant of the culture in the Pale that gave a context for my family, especially the numerous teachers among my relatives, or my mother's Communist cousins whom she barely talked about, and an uncle whose exploits echoed the lives of underworld figures immortalized in Yiddish folk song. Once my mother and her brothers saw I was interested in yidishkayt, they passed on their own memories of summer Sundays in the Rockaway bungalow their Uncle Klein paid for, where my grandmother and her five sisters squeezed into the bathroom to catch up on each other's news, while their husbands argued politics in the front room, the three Yiddish dailies spread out before them. Through Yiddish histories and yisgor books, I learned about the Jewish Labor Bund that coordinated strikes in Polish bakeries and textile mills, and also created evening schools and discussion circles for Jewish workers.. I learned how Bundist teachers, mostly women, and other Jewish educators fought Orthodox rabbis and Russian officials to establish schools or curricula in Yiddish for children, to combat widespread Jewish illiteracy. I learned how famous writers like

Peretz and Kadia Molodowsky would read to the kids in these Warsaw kindergartens and schools. It was life changing for me to learn about the Bund, the political and cultural movement that promoted and nurtured Yiddish as a central aspect of Jewish national pride. I now understood not only in my head but in an intensely personal way why the black students at my college had needed courses about their ancestors and communities, and I understood in my gut the struggle of Latino immigrants, for example, against English only.

So how DID I learn to read Yiddish? (and I mean read, or maybe sing because I still can't speak it very well.) In 1988 I made my way to New York City, enrolling in the beginners' level of the YIVO summer Yiddish program. My teacher turned out to be Irena Klepfisz, a lesbian writer and scholar who is the daughter of one of the martyrs of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Pesakh Fishman was another encouraging teacher. I received a good foundation that summer, but would never have been able to build on it if I had gone back to my regular work life in the fall. Instead, I was traveling around the country in a pickup truck with my partner, and for the first two hours every morning, while she drove I settled in with my Yiddish books and dictionaries. We went across the country and back, and by the time we moved to Eugene, I could get through a paragraph of Avrom Reisin in about an hour. No table talk pies for me yet

I didn't join the temple in Eugene right away. I thought of TBI as a place of worship, and at best I am ambivalent about worship. I do always respond to the music of prayersongs like Eytz Chayeem Hi, L'cha Dodi, and Rabbi Yitz's beautiful melodies and lyrics. But I am horribly literal, and I have trouble with masculine pronoun endings that reference God in Hebrew, and I have trouble offering praises to an omnipotent something called Sovereign and Ruler in English. If I've read a book on kabala recently, my critical edge softens and the Hebrew words for God evoke a divine energy that flows through everything and *needs* our attunement *with* it to go on nurturing life. Still, it's hard for me to reconcile this universal idea with something called the God of Israel. Also because I'm literal, it's hard for me when we read over and over about the covenant that gives us sovereignty in the land of Israel only if we treat the stranger in our midst as ourselves. I wonder why then we don't raise our voices more against the fundamentalist settler Zionism that the Israeli government mostly supports and that rides roughshod over what we say we believe when we pray.

So with these biases about the meaning of prayer, it took me some time to gravitate to TBI in Eugene, not recognizing it as a community home beyond a place of worship. But I did find my way to the Baleboostehs, a welcoming Jewish Lesbian

Rosh Chodesh group that had already been gathering in Eugene for years, and I found there a willingness to experiment with ritual that was light and fun and often deeply personal

I finally joined TBI as a result of my friendship with Syd Skolsky, a performer of Yiddish music, a writer, and a mentor of many people here, including Rabbi Yitz. . When Syd's health deteriorated to the point where we were providing 24 hour care, I realized that people on TBI's social services committee—at that time headed by Ellen Maddex-- were providing the bulk of the help—and I decided it was time to become a member.

I participated in the very early years of TBI's Yiddish Club, convened and facilitated by Carole Stein. Tonight we're marking the first yortsayt of Don Zadoff, one of the founding members of the group, whom I remember with fondness and respect, and whom I miss. Dorothy Anker, our leader and teacher for many years now, is an anchor in my life, as she is to quite a few people who draw sustenance from Yiddish and from her. She has actually brought us to the level of reading unabridged Sholem Aleichem. Like Mrs. Turk, she delights in teaching and has a great laugh.

Finally, I've been active on and off since the 80s first with New Jewish Agenda, then Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, and now J Street, working for the vision of mutually supportive Palestinian and Israeli states. (An elusive vision.) But my greatest pleasure is still playing Yiddish music on the accordion . Lisa Arkin shared with me the repertoire of songs she learned from her grandmother, and two visits to Klezcamp in the 90s, which takes place over Christmas week in the Catskills, introduced me to a worldwide community of passionate Yiddishists and musicians. I also had the privilege of playing Yiddish music for a couple of years in a band, which gave me a sense of profound joy and community that I hope I will find a way to experience again.

That is my Jewish American life in as much of a nutshell as I could press it into.
Thank you for your patience, thank you for the community here that sustains me and good Shabbos.