

THIS JEWISH AMERICAN LIFE 2013

Shabbat Shalom

My grandparents were Orthodox of sorts. My maternal grandfather was a cantor. He married in Europe and had 7 children. When his wife died he married my grandmother, moved to Philadelphia, and proceeded to have 6 children. My mother was born in Phillie. My grandmother was 4 years older than the oldest of the first set of children; she was an amazing woman who mothered all the children, and ran a restaurant, and made bathtub gin. She was handsome and sexy. I really loved her. When my mother was 11 her father died. My mother was elected to drop out of school and never went to high school because she became the housekeeper for the family. My mother never had a job outside the home, and never had a checkbook until my father died. She had no formal Jewish education.

My father's family moved to Chicago from Poland in 1905; my father was 7. My father's family were more observant; I think my paternal grandmother was the daughter of a rabbi; she was literate in Hebrew. I assume my father had a bar mitzvah. My father dropped out of school in fifth grade ... to earn money for the family. He was a self taught bookkeeper.

I was born in Chicago in 1939; we were relatively poor. My parents spoke fluent Yiddish but never taught it to us. Actually, they never taught us anything about the Jewish religion as religion. They did a great job of modeling lower middle class Chicago Jewish culture. My family kept kosher. As the year's progressed, though, my family became less observant in many ways. My sister never went to Hebrew school. My 3 brothers and I went to Hebrew school and became bar mitzvah. But involvement in any schul ended with the bar mitzvahs. My parents really didn't observe the holidays except Passover ... oh, and lighting Chanukah candles. I really don't remember Shabbat with any candles or blessings but we had challah ... and chicken. I mean boiled chicken which we ate plain because the real purpose of the chicken was my mother's delicious chicken soup. Plain boiled chicken ... ymmm. ... maybe. The chickens were bought live at the corner chicken store. We fought over the given; we fought over the unhatched chicken eggs. Those really were yummm. But ... don't ask me why ... we fought over the chicken tuchis.. .. Yuck.

I went to Hebrew school 4 days a week after school and also on Sunday. The education was atrocious. It was really anti education. In retrospect I think our teacher was probably a Holocaust survivor. We learned nothing of much value and nothing inspiring. We learned nothing about the beauty of Judaism and nothing about Israel or Zionism. My family didn't help in any way to fill in the gaps or dispel the negative training of my Hebrew school years. This left me with a very ignorant and negative view of Judaism as a religion.

I grew up in a Jewish neighborhood in Chicago. The public school was 98% Jewish. On the High Holidays, the classrooms were empty. Our block was all 3 story apartment buildings. At Christmas time if you saw two Christmas trees in a window anywhere on our block, that was a miracle.

Rogers Park was a lower middle class Jewish neighborhood with people like my family moving out of the Orthodox neighborhood (Albany Park) and modernizing into a Conservative kind of Jewish life rather than Orthodox. My family, for example, moved away from Kashrut slowly. I'll get back to that in a moment. We moved to Rogers Park

in 1948, into a 3 flat building with all three floors of relatives. My father's brother married my mother's sister. We were on the first floor; they were on the third floor. Another aunt and uncle were on the second floor. It was a wonderful community for me, with other relatives within 4 blocks. I really liked growing up in this very warm, very loving Jewish family community.

But getting back to Kashrut, the aunt and uncle on the second floor didn't keep kosher. We ate non Kosher outside the house, like at the neighborhood Chinese restaurant ... fried rice with pork ...oh, yummm. Eventually my parents wanted to bring the Chinese food into the house as takeout. So we went up to the second floor to borrow their dishes and silverware to have our non Kosher food. After a while we had our own non Kosher set of dishes. After a while we stopped having separate milk and meat dishes (we had had 6 sets of dishes: every day milk and meat; good milk and meat dishes; and Pesadicha milk and meat dishes.) Who knows my parents' thinking about the slow change ... but eventually we just had dishes and silverware with no distinction about kosher and non kosher. Was it the expense of a family of 7 needing to keep up 6 sets of dishes? or was it a slow drifting away of Jewish observance? Definitely the latter.

So ... my Hebrew school education was terrible. I learned the Hebrew letters and how to read in Hebrew. I think I learned very little vocabulary. I don't recall learning any Jewish history, anything about Zionism or Israel, or anything about spirituality. We must have learned about some of the holidays and how to observe. I didn't learn trope but memorized my haftorah and the blessings. The school atmosphere was dreary. OK ... the synagogue was a store front at the end of the block where we lived in what eventually became a Chinese laundry. While in I was in Hebrew School the synagogue (Bnai Jacob) built a structure a few blocks away. My bar mitzvah was in the unfinished basement of the unfinished synagogue on a 100 degree June Chicago day. I'm sure I was good ... as a student of memorization. As a thinker nah ... not so good. But thinking wasn't asked of us.

I was a good boy. I needed to prove I was a good boy. So I went to Hebrew school for five years to 'graduate' whereas my friends only went 4 years to just get through the bar mitzvah. Some good boy: what I learned was to move away from Judaism. My parents non involvement with Judaism or Zionism didn't help. In high school I joined a Jewish youth group and learned lots of Israeli songs and dances. But I never really learned about Zionism. Looking back on it, that is really strange.

I grew up in a Jewish neighborhood. My elementary school was all Jewish ... I went to a high school with 4000 students and over 50% were Jews. All my friends were Jews. I went to the University of Michigan for 3 years and was in a Jewish fraternity. Everyone I knew was Jewish. I went to a huge medical school and all my friends were Jews. My whole world was Jewish ... but not religious Judaism nor political or Zionist Judaism. It was cultural, apolitical, nonthinking and non-believing Judaism. That was my world, and that was me.

In my internship and psychiatric residency Judaism was probably the last thing on my mind. And then I wound up in Vietnam as a division psychiatrist. I was in denial about Vietnam for 10 years after my year of service there, and then in various forms of counseling for the next 10 years about my serious problems with being a Vietnam veteran; I didn't have PTSD but I was messed up for sure. And what I discovered was that part of my core issue about Vietnam was that I was Jewish. For me, Vietnam was

evil. My job was to grease the wheels of the military machine by helping guys go out and kill or be killed. But I was totally against our being in Vietnam. I had deep, deep shame and guilt for having served in Vietnam. And the guilt was complicated by my Jewishness.

As a child something profound happened to me by 1945 I think I saw the newsreels of the children in the concentration camps. I became so thin I looked like a concentration camp kid. As a teenager ... a very ignorant teenager, I was enraged with Jews for having been sheep going to the Nazi slaughter. In Vietnam I was still angry over what I considered Jewish passivity in World War II. And from guilt over serving in the Army in Vietnam, I considered that I was doing the same work as the guards in the concentration camps ... I was being complicit with an evil government and military. In my last counseling about Vietnam I realized I was a Nazi victim (the child in the camps) and I was a Nazi ... I was both. This was very powerful for me but I also realized something much more than that ... Besides being a victim and a perpetrator, I am so much more complex and basically I am a being of Light. I am a being of Light. I gave a shabbat sermon about this years ago in the old building.

So my Judaism runs very deep in me but was dormant until I started dating Joan in 1985. Interestingly, I moved to Eugene in 1971 and most of the people I hung out with were Jews non observant Jews, of course. I knew about TBI but never attended. I met Rabbi Neimand and had two personal contacts with him. When he died I heard about two hippies leading the Shabbat services and that I had to see and hear them. I went ... and saw Yitz and Aryeh Hirshfield garbed in my paternal grandfather's tallit. They were like ... I don't know ... I said Jesus freaks because the zeal of their singing was like Gospel music to my very uneducated ears. I couldn't stop crying about them wrapped in my grandfather's tallit. Now this is actually weird because I only saw my grandfather's tallit in the services in his shul. Of course, being poor my grandfather was in the basement of the Orthodox shul ... and the room was dark and smelly. I didn't like the room, the smells, or even my grandfather... but here I was in 1975 in flood of nostalgia over my grandfather's tallit. Or maybe it was something deeper touching me but I was totally ignorant of what it could be. I went to Friday night services 6 times; on the sixth time I stopped crying ... and I stopped going to TBI.

I adopted my daughter in 1976. She was Jewish as she was born to a Jewish mother. My case worker told me to keep that a secret as Oregon is small and the biological families didn't want the issue of adoption to ever come out. My mother wanted me to have a Jewish baby naming ceremony. In Oregon at that time one could have an adoption rescinded on legal grounds for the first year but after that the adoption was closed to any interruption. So I held off on having the baby naming service until Jacqueline was one. I then approached the new rabbi in town Rabbi Myron Kinberg to have a baby naming ceremony in my house. So that's how I met Myron.

I raised Jacqueline Jewish in a cultural sense but not much more. However, things changed when I began dating Joan in 1985. Joan said I had a "limp relationship to Judaism" and that I needed to change that. I agreed with her and agreed to change. And I have.

I attended TBI services regularly for quite a long time, and I learned a lot from Myron and Yitz. I did some reading. Sharon Ungerleider brought a mini-Wexner course to Eugene for several of us to take, and I got a lot out of studying with that group. I

followed Joan to Reconstructionism's annual meetings and other Reconstructionist events, and learned a lot that way. Because of Joan I went to Israel three times and learned a great deal that way.

When I retired I got involved with interfaith organizations. I was on the Two Rivers Interrfaith Ministries board for several years. I became very involved with the Religious Response Network. I felt it was important for me to represent progressive Judaism in several settings and in order to do so I had to be better educated. I think I have done an OK job about that ... about educating myself and about representing progressive Judaism ... maybe not excellent job but OK.

I learned a lot working with Jesse Rappaport and Joan when the three of us wrote three documents over 2 years: a revision of the Tahara manual, a booklet on Jewish burial and mourning rituals, and a questionnaire for all congregants on what Jewish burial and mourning rituals do you want when you die. I joined the Chevra Kadisha and along with Libby Bottero chaired it for several years. That was a great learning experience. I learned a lot in creating the Understanding Anti-Semitism Project, and by being a part of the Jewish Community Relations Council. I also learned a lot being part of CALC's Anti Hate Task Force and dealing with the Pacifica Forum.

I watched our son Dagan become a bar mitzvah. I watched our daughter Jacqueline become a bat mitzvah. I married Joan in the synagogue ... all these were tremendous learning experiences.

But the majority of my learning has come from Joan ... a very knowledgeable Reconstructionist Jew. She has been a source of information, wisdom, and inspiration for me, as well as a marvelous spiritual fellow traveler on our individual and our joint paths of maturing and growth.

I consider myself very fortunate to be Jewish. I love being Jewish. I love being Jewish at this time. I think living in the USA now is the very best time ever for women to be Jewish. I think living in the USA at this time is the very best time and place ever to be a progressive Jew. I find Judaism an endless complexity on many levels ... to be explored, appreciated, and integrated into my life helping me be more of the whole person I want to be. I feel very fortunate and very blessed being a member of the TBI community, and I appreciate being able to share my story with you.

Shabbat shalom