



## ***My Jewish Journey***

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*At Congregation Beth El of Berkeley, we invite diverse members of the Congregation to speak on Rosh Hashanah morning on “My Jewish Journey.” This is one of three congregation talks delivered this year.*

I hail from the Old Country – by which I mean Great Neck, NY, the classic post-war Jewish suburb. Where better to start my Jewish Journey? But right after my bar mitzvah, I put that journey on hold – and when I made my exodus to the Bay Area ten years later, I never would have expected to be anywhere near a bimah talking about my Jewishness on Rosh-Hashana. But hineni -- here I am!

My great-grandparents came to the U.S. in the early-1900s from what was then the Russian Empire and now are parts of the Ukraine and Belarus – shtetls in places called Levinpol and Vishnevets. This I learned not from my relatives, who never talked about life in what really was the Old Country, but mostly from documents I found on [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com). I don't even know where my last name “Love” comes from – no one seemed to have asked my great-grandfather Abraham Love while he was alive.

My mother fondly remembers boisterous Shabbat dinners hosted by her Yiddish-speaking grandparents when she was young. But her parents chose to assimilate on the upper west side of Manhattan, where cocktail parties, not lighting candles, was their Friday night activity of choice. And her husband/my father provided no support for carrying on Jewish traditions as he had no interest in ritual or religion.

So, I grew up in a Jewish household, but not an observant one. We belonged to a reform synagogue and dutifully attended high holiday services, which my father would inevitably snore through; I fasted on Yom Kippur (but only to feel entitled the Zabars' spread at break-fast); we lit candles and got presents – or at least socks – every night of Chanukah; and had a seder on Passover, where I was chastised by my elders for suggesting we might consider the oppression of people who weren't Jewish.

At my Hebrew school, the overarching theme was the Holocaust. Being Jewish, so I understood, was all about suffering through the centuries at the hands of our persecutors – and how we must never let the Holocaust of Jewish people happen again. I'm sure there was more to it – particularly seeing how my childhood friends – generous, community-minded people -- have so much more easily navigated through their Jewish journeys. But I felt suffocated by what I perceived as an extremely insular worldview – one that championed Jewish causes and Jewish people only.

Then there was my bar mitzvah. I can still remember sitting down with Cantor Weintraub -- and his beard -- to “work” on my d'rash. It was essentially a Jewish mad lib – filling in various blanks on a pre-prepared sheet of paper depending on one's Torah portion. I wasn't pushed to look deeper – it didn't seem to matter. I somehow got through the service, while I was mostly consumed with anxiety about whether Emily Honig would slow dance with me at the party. And that was it. I was done with my Jewish obligations for the next 30-plus years.

As an adult, I always felt “Jewish” – but it was often hard to separate out what was a Jewish sensibility and what was just being a New Yorker. Was my love of bagels and smoked fish a Jewish thing or a NY thing?

I loved the Marx Brothers, Mel Brooks and early, pre-creepy Woody Allen. But did they resonate with me because of a shared Jewish heritage or were they just funny?

As for my inability to hammer a nail straight or really do anything handy around the house -- was it some epigenetic reaction to Jews having been excluded from the trade guilds in the Middle Ages (as I still maintain) or am I just a klutz?

I'm a lawyer – a classic Jewish profession. And I've always felt compelled to pursue social justice, spending most of my professional life -- 25 years -- representing death row inmates. A public interest career wasn't encouraged by my family, temple or community growing up. If anything, it was a reaction to it. But was I unwittingly influenced by my Jewishness -- some innate sense of tikkun olam?

So, there I was, a lox-loving, wise-cracking, social justice lawyer from NY with no carpentry skills. If that doesn't signify “Jew,” I don't know what does.

But while I seemed to naturally embody a cultural Jewishness, I wasn't interested in going to services or joining a temple. I guess I was still suffering from post-bar mitzvah stress disorder, and reacting to an upbringing in which we were supposed to consider ourselves the “chosen people” and everyone else as “the other.”

But with a critical push (several pushes) from my wise non-Jewish wife, we joined Congregation Beth El, which I quickly realized was not the temple of my childhood. Still, I was really doing it for the kids. I wanted them to have the meaningful Jewish education I didn't have, but I didn't see what the temple had to offer me. At the same time, I felt it was important to participate so that they, unlike me, didn't have to endure a cynical, snoring-during-services kind-of-a-dad.

And that's how it started. First, high holiday services and then Chug Mishpacha (the Saturday family Hebrew School we attended with our children). What was truly transformative were the b'nai mitzvahs of not just my kids but those of their cohorts – filled with joy and meaning, and each one linking their Jewishness to something bigger in their own a unique way. I found myself at Shabbaton (the Congregation's yearly retreat). I joined a social justice committee. And I attend the yearly Gala. The culmination of my Jewish Journey to date – before standing up here – was writing my own Passover Hagaddah – but that's another story.

I've slowly come to embrace a broader concept of what it means to be Jewish than when I started this journey back in Great Neck.

For me:

It is about being part of a congregation, but caring for a community that is far broader than The Congregation;

It is about honoring our stories and traditions – not to foster a self-protective layer against the outside world -- but to connect us to the larger world -- to those who have their own stories, traditions and struggles for freedom;

It is about never forgetting the Holocaust -- or the Inquisition or the Exodus -- but celebrating our persistence and our ability to evolve and grow as a People;

And, finally, it is about telling a good joke, eating a decent bagel, and knowing a good plumber to call.