



## ***Annual Appeal Drash***

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It is October of 2002, and I am at my parents' house for their annual Yom Kippur community break-the-fast. I am in my first year of graduate school at Berkeley, and pining away for the very handsome and very charming Irish-Catholic boyfriend I left behind in Washington DC two months before. So, I am doing my usual thing of noshing and schmoozing when a friend of my mother's corners me in our dining room. And – before I say anymore, I just want to say that if any of Jodi's friends are in the synagogue this evening – this story is not about any of you. This woman (who is NONE of you, I promise) had married someone who was not Jewish, and she wanted to pass on a warning to me: don't do it, she said, don't marry someone who isn't Jewish. You will never fully feel like part of your community. I believe that this woman had kind intentions; she wanted to spare me from the isolation she'd experienced, and she wanted to help me see the thorny path ahead of me should I choose to marry an "outsider."

But she was too late. I had already fallen hopelessly and irretrievably in love with Dan, and had zero interest in hearing from anyone that I should tread carefully when blending faiths and cultures. You can probably see where this is going, but I'm not really here to recite a love letter to Dan, or talk about the beautiful tangle of joy and agony that is being married to another human being. I'm here to talk about my love for Beth El, which just like all great loves, runs long, deep and complicated.

I am what you might call part of the "Beth El Old School." I was named here when I was 6 weeks old, and spent my formative nursery school years in the Alef and Bet classes – back when they were called Alef and Bet, but before there was a Gan Katan - and back when the Synagogue was on Arch and Vine. When I was 5, I experienced my first Kee Tov summer, back then there was no Rishonim, and Edah Alef had full-fledged overnights at Gillespie – I was returned home from that overnight, soaking wet, because the sprinklers came on at 2:00 am. Hats off to the counselors who managed that fiasco without the aid of cell phones.

My two sisters and I went all the way through the Beth El religious school, we all had our Bat Mitzvahs here, spent every summer at Kee Tov, and eventually became a Kee Tov counselors – some of us for longer than others. And if you take a look at the corridor leading to the Rabbi's and Cantor's offices where all the photos of past presidents hang, and you'll see a photo of my dad, Buddy Warner, who held that esteemed role from 2001 to 2003. We were whole-heartedly and unquestioningly a Beth El family.

You might ask how a family with such deep roots at a Synagogue would react when their oldest daughter decided to marry someone outside the tribe. If they were anything besides over-joyed, to their credit, they never let me know, and both Dan's parents and mine have loved us as their own flesh and blood. That was the easy part. The rest was not so easy.

Fast forward three years and jump one coast from that Yom Kippur break the fast: Dan and I are married and living in Baltimore, I'm newly pregnant with our first child, and in addition to trying to figure out which crib is least likely to kill the baby, I am trying to figure out how we will raise this child in a blended 2-religion family. I ask a family friend – a Rabbi – for some advice, and he sends me some very helpful literature telling us that raising a child in an inter-faith household is actually quite easy – as long as your spouse converts to Judaism and you never let a Christmas tree cross the threshold of your living room. I threw the book away.

It just seemed like there was nowhere that would make room for the kind of Jewish that I wanted to be: the Judaism of Rad Hayom in Roberts Park on Kee Tov family night; a Judaism of holding hands across the synagogue and singing Avinu Malkenu as the last light fades on Yom Kippur; a Judaism focused on good acts and good deeds and not the beliefs that brought you there. So when people ask me why I moved back to Berkeley – a few months shy of Anna's second birthday – I usually talk about wanting to be closer to my parents and sisters, the new job that awaited me at Kaiser, and that I couldn't bear another August in the mid-Atlantic, but there was more to it than that. I wanted to give Anna and then Dylan the kind of spiritual foundation and community that had held me all my life.

And has it been easy? It most certainly has not! You try explaining to a spouse who attended 13 years of subsidized parochial school that, yes, you have to pay dues to belong to a Synagogue, and no, those dues do not cover the nursery school, which, by the way is closed next Thursday because of Shavuot, and no, I don't know what Shavuot is. And man it is so expensive living in Berkeley, and really hard to justify adding line items to your budget -- especially during an almost-election year, and when you also want to stop deforestation in the Amazon, help children held captive at the border, and the woman with 3 tiny children and a cardboard sign who you see every Saturday in the parking lot at El Cerrito plaza. But we still find ways to compromise, because these are all important priorities.

And in exchange, we get to listen to our daughters tell us in delighted squeals that now that they can write in Hebrew, they can send secret notes to each other in code. I get to hear the evolution of Kee Tov cheers, shouted at ear-splitting decibels at the dinner table. My daughters are growing up with guideposts written thousands of years ago and passed from generation to generation that will teach them how to be generous and kind, to thirst for knowledge and understanding, and wrestle with difficult truths. For myself, I have a space to pray, a place to celebrate and to grieve, and a place that seamlessly weaves us into the fabric of the community, even though we don't fit the mold of a typical Jewish family. This past May, as I handed my older daughter Anna the Torah on the day she became a Bat Mitzvah – the same Torah that was handed to me 29 years earlier – I passed it to her with all the members of my beloved blended family on the bimah – Jewish and Catholic, West Coast and East, agnostics and believers, because Beth El makes space for all of us.

In a world where we're constantly asked to pick sides, where threats to who we are and what we stand for impel us to huddle in with our "own", it is a Mitzvah and a blessing that places like Beth El are here with open arms to embrace the stranger, the misfit, the wayward daughter, and welcome us to bask in the light and wisdom of its most sacred texts and spaces.

I hope you will join me and my family by, maybe grumbling a little, maybe having to cajole a very charming and reluctant spouse, and give what you can. In doing so, you will be giving a gift to Beth El that makes the Synagogue's budget whole. Because this is a place that makes space for us – for all of us – as we are, without condition or pledge of fealty. And so I hope you will join me this year in making space in your very long list of priorities for this sacred place and community that so lovingly includes us all.