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## ***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 have always thought of myself as culturally Jewish. Celebrating Passover, my favorite holiday, and attending high holiday services, like today. Passed down from my father and mother being Jewish meant being honest and trying to do the right thing; although the right thing is not always clear. My father and mother also passed down to me a fear of being Jewish and that has shaped my Jewish journey.

But, My Jewish journey can not be separated from the generations and history of my extended family. I understand how they tried to protect their children from an uncertain and frightening world.

I remember my father telling me on more than one occasion that I did not need tell people I was Jewish. I was an American. No one needed to know I was Jewish. I must have been about 10 years old when I heard this for the first time.

My parents wanted me to have a Bar Mitzvah...or maybe it was their Bar Mitzvah. It seemed to be something they needed me to do for them. So they found the reformed congregation called Mogen David. Which, when I heard I was going there, I thought they were sending me off to make wine! When the Rabbi arrived in class one day and asked if we had any questions, I asked “How do we know there is a God”...not a “smart-alex” question but a serious question for me. He said, “if we didn’t have a god who would keep the planets from crashing into each other.” Reflecting back there was profound disappointment in his answer, no spiritual reflection on my important question.

My spiritual journey began there, Both Jewish and Buddhist. I can begin to see my pattern as a questioning person. My question “How do we know there is a God” was a good one. I wonder if

we don't all begin our spiritual journey with some question about who or what is God? It is a fundamental question...why am I here, what is the meaning of all this?

For my Bar Mitzvah my parents had invitations printed up. But only enough for family and their friends. I remember going on my bike to the local drug store to buy invitations to send my friends. I stumbled through my Bar Mitzvah. My poorly transliterated prayers and a few words of a drash on a torah portion I cannot remember. My Uncle Sam took pictures but forgot to take the lens cap off his camera, so there are no photo's of me becoming a man. At our house the catered food was inside with my parents and their friends and my aunts and uncles. In our backyard my father came out and cooked hot dogs for me and my friends as we stood around awkwardly as newly minted teenagers. This was my Bar Mitzvah.

Lucky for me a couple of years after my Bar Mitzvah I found Alan Ginsburg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder and the poetry of the "beats" thanks to my high school English teacher. These rebellious young men were fighting the status quo of the 50's and it led them to reach out to the East and the Orient for a spiritual way of understanding life... this spoke to me. I found myself wandering into poetry, Alan Watts, Buddhism and Humanistic psychology. Four forces that have shaped my spiritual life.

By 1974 I was a serious practicing lay Buddhist. Both my children have Tibetan Buddhist middle names.

About 12 years ago I realized in all my spiritual searching and studying I had never read the Torah! I had translated the Heart Sutra from Tibetan to English but never read the Torah! How did this happen? I knew by its absence that something has gone amiss. I went around looking for a Torah Study group and found Saturday mornings here at Beth El. Torah Study was welcoming and enlightening and for the last 10 years Carolyn and I have been attending regularly on Saturday mornings.

One Saturday morning in a drash by Ellen Bernstein, she asked about what is in a name? What does a name signify?

I was moved by her drash and went home and look for the records my father had sent me of the naturalization papers for him and my grandparents. I found in late 1920's my grandfather's names changed their names from Shmule Lintinsky and Naftali Berenbloom to Sam Linton and Nate Bloom. As I discovered, like so many of their generation they longed to be identified as Americans. My father too became a Linton from a Litinsky, he was 17 years old at the time.

I see my Jewish journey was part of this tradition that moved from a Jewish orthodoxy in Eastern Europe to secularism in America. Between pogroms, antisemitism and poverty my grandparents came as refugees to America. My grandparents, and parents believed that if they acculturated into America they would be safe, their children would be safe. Generations of fear for being Jewish might end in America. I understand now my parents wanted to protect me and

my brother and sisters from this disturbing past. My grandparents never talked about the past. Until 2 months ago I never knew my grandfather "Litinsky" was one of 10 brothers.

Upon reflection I understood in my family the "baby went out with the bathwater." My parents' fear of antisemitism called for them to protect their children and themselves by dismissing any serious identification with Judaism. Being an American was their identity with a few social customs of their Jewish tradition. Living as an American would protect them from the terrors of a dark past. The unconscious fears they carried from the multigenerational struggles with pogroms and other forms of persecution would be alleviated by not being "too Jewish." They could maintain a token relationship (such as the enactment of my Bar Mitzvah) of a cultural affinity to stay connected with family and friends, but certainly not to have their children Jewishly identified.

A few weeks ago in the Torah Study, Steve Joseph's was doing a drash on Parashat "Re'eh" In my notebook I wrote down something he said, "find the place where God dwells in you and seek it out-no matter how difficult." I wish my first Rabbi might have said that. But I do hear it now and my Jewish journey has brought me here to Beth El where I have returned home to find the ancestors I have never known.