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Safe in America, eating from a bountiful table, hurrying to synagogue, struggling to decode my parents' Yiddish, puzzling out, the ever faithful, biblical patriarchs, I enjoyed the rhythm of a full, American Jewish life. But we were shadowed by a shattered world.

In 1937, my father Max aged 29 escaped Leipzig, Germany—Two brothers already here, two in Palestine; his other brother Leo dragooned to a Nazi work camp. Leo's wife deported to Auschwitz— A Hadassah train carried to England their two children Harry and Ruth. My grandparents, with my unmarried, sickly aunt, fled to their ancestral Polish/Ukrainian village.

Ten years later in 1947 Harry and Ruth came to live with us in Washington D.C. In our world were my father's many Eastern European friends, survivors, felt fedoras covering their heads, tattooed numbers on their forearms.

In our world was a small, orthodox synagogue. Dressed in new fall finery (stiff patent leather shoes) my sister and I would rush expectantly to High Holiday services. In the shul the atmosphere crackled with raucous fervor. After sitting awhile, nestled next to my mother, in the women's' section, my sister and I would be released to run around outside. No matter our arrival time--at the front, near the bimah, a tallit wrapped minyan, fervently swaying, speed mumbled the prayers.

My father, a gifted tenor with cantorial ambition, sang in other, grander, synagogue choirs.

When my father applied for German reparations, I typed the letters.

Our world included my mother's seven brothers and sisters and many cousins who were more assimilated and thoroughly American. For my mother's parents had arrived at the turn of the century. We celebrated endless simchas, lively Purim spiels and crowded seders, with my father's provocative droshot on freedom's true meaning.

My father insisted his girls have a Jewish education, such as it was. He sent us to what he called cheder, definitely pedagogically challenged. We had a home Hebrew tutor and later synagogue after school classes.

During Passover my mother packed my school lunches with Matzo sandwiches. Much later when I was in college, she bombarded me with bagels.

Finally both my mother and father always hectored us: "Put your nose in a book."

Somehow, despite everything, my father's Jewish soul believed it important to stick to being Jewish, to pray the liturgy, to keep Shabbat and the holidays, to remember God, to celebrate, and cling to an ever-precarious freedom.

Did my father harken to Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav, an 18th Century Chasid, who said, "Jews --It is forbidden to despair."

When as a young adult, I came up for air, surfaced and looked to grab hold of my own Jewish identity I took for granted my big dose of yiddishkeit, Ashkenazi halachah, and the holocaust. And I didn't fully appreciate that childhood glimpse of shimmering piety. Along with many in the 1960s, social action seemed a natural for my Jewish identity. But gradually I longed to fill in many missing and lost pieces of my education and experience—to wrestle with Torah and Taanach, to read the prophets, to grasp the full range of Jewish literature, to explore the history of Jewish civilizations, to discover the diversity of Jewish cultures. I identified as Jewish, but to put meat on the bones - I had, and still have, a lot to learn.

And surely Abraham Joshua Heschel was right to say that we cannot plagiarize our grand- parents' Judaism.

By the time our two children were thoroughly competent bar and bat mitzvah, I realized that I too wanted to fully participate in the synagogue service. My Hebrew had gone rusty. And more importantly on the bimah both our son AND our daughter were reading from the sacred scroll.

An adult bat mitzvah changed my life. During my daily San Francisco BART commute, I'd hum my torah and haftorah tropes. God knows what my seat mates thought. Torah study and commentary began to unravel the bible's multi-dimensional richness. A whole world of text study, rabbinic ideas; medieval Sephardic poetry, suddenly became accessible. Each new bit of learning balanced on the rest.

And I started to read history, that is, modern, academic Jewish history. Some contrast academic history with a traditional Jewish cyclic view of history – a never ending replay of land, exile and redemption. I'm in the camp that celebrates a more expansive complex, multi faceted view. In the ancient near east a tiny Israelite kingdom was both deeply influenced by, and influenced, it's surrounding cultures. Judaism, ideas and theology changed over time. Practice, culture, halakah, languages were diverse, fluid and dynamic.

In among all this rummaging around I found my way to making and learning about Jewish art- a phrase I had thought to be an oxymoron.—From Chagall to early 2nd and 3rd Century synagogue mosaic floors, from 3rd century figurative wall paintings in the Dura Europas synagogue, from medieval illuminated haggadot and Taanach, to cabbalist word drawings, to Polish synagogues, every interior inch covered with painted narrative and so much more. The long history of Jewish experience includes a rich, deep and exciting visual culture.

Why even the Book of Exodus describes the desert tabernacle as full of art. The ark holding the Mosaic tablets is placed in the most sacred tabernacle space: the holy of holies. Atop the ark are twin statues, statues of winged cherubim. Body of a lion, head of a man, outstretched and touching eagle's wings, or in rabbinic midrash-- two angels. God is said to dwell in the space between them. On Yom Kippur we will read from Leviticus 16 the instructions for the kohen gadol, the high priest, who once a year enters the holy of holies. He parts the curtains, he carries a pan of burning coals sprinkled with sweet smelling, smoking incense. He cannot see the cherubim; he is forbidden to look.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur fill me with joy—the crowded sanctuary, the haunting melodies, the deeply personal liturgy--for a nanosecond, I'm sitting in my childhood shul, a little girl again. The curtains of my grown-up rationalism part. I cannot look. Before the gates close I let myself wish, I pray, as hard as I can, for a sweet, SAFE new year.

L'shana tovah.