

### *Seeking*

**I have been a seeker**, though many times I didn't know what I sought. I have used many names for what was absent in my life: ritual, ethical framework, spiritual home, even a context for raising my children. In the 1980's I wrestled with the idea of converting to Judaism with my old friend Brad Artson, now Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson. In 1994, I took Intro to Judaism at Lehrhaus Judaica. I followed the Jewish calendar. I went to synagogue with friends. And yet, I only **arrived at Congregation Beth El in 2001, 17 years ago, lifetimes ago.**

### *Choosing Judaism*

The moment of choice came when I was sitting in the congregation at Beth Israel for my neighbor Archie Greenberg's funeral. During the illness that preceded his death, we could do little to help his family except take out the garbage bins if we got up *very, very, very* early on Thursday mornings. The Beth Israel community surrounded them. Sitting at Beth Israel that morning, I asked myself why, when I had felt this pull to Judaism for almost two decades, had I denied it? And, **in a flash of longing that was only that**, I decided enough was enough. I would convert, bringing my two young children and my non-Jewish husband along with me.

## ***Holy Community***

Then, I **didn't know the name of what I yearned for**; I know it now. Its name is *kehillah kedoshah*, holy community. I sought, but didn't know that I wanted a community, united by the rhythms of the year that pulse with the seasons, a community to help me separate the sacred from the profane. I sought community that celebrates with the joyous and grieves with the mourning – that nurtures children and cares for those in need, whether that need is emotional or physical. I came here, unknowing, a bit **fearful** about our reception, very **willing** to give, and **seeking** to belong.

## ***True Meaning of Holy Community***

In my 17 years at Beth El, I have learned the meaning of community and the ebb and flow of being part of a holy community. At first I thought it was about giving, doing, engaging. And it is. But the most important lesson for me is that it is as much about receiving as about giving, as much about being as doing. Perhaps this is prosaic, but in *my* life I was rewarded from my earliest years for competence and energy and being able to perform no matter what. These are good things, to a point. But the ability to just *be*, the openness to receive, the courage to reveal need were things I had to learn.

I grew up a Black, middle-class, girl-child in California. I was taught: 1) that I could do anything I set my mind to, and 2) not to expect anyone to take care of me, but me. In the midst of a chaotic merger of families when my mother remarried when I was 9, I was prized for my ability to

adapt and not to need anything, and if I did, to hide it because my stepsiblings needed so much more. I do not say this to invoke pity. I am privileged and was graced with parents who believed in me and instilled in me a belief in myself, who educated me and exposed me to a wealth of experiences that enrich my life to this day. I say it to underscore the point that learning to be a full participant in *kehillah kedoshah* was a stretch for me.

Why? Because, inherent in truly belonging is being vulnerable – showing your true face. At Beth El, I have found a place to show my true face. Triumphant, fearful, happy, profoundly sad, in pain and joy, this has been my home. It is critical to have that freedom to be able to fall and know your arms will catch me, even as it is important for me to know that there will come a time when I can catch you.

### ***Being Helpable***

Many years ago I heard Bonnie St. John speak. An African American Paralympic gold medalist and former Clinton appointee, she spoke about being *helpable*. She too grew up with the notion that asking for or needing help was a sign of weakness to be avoided at all cost. In her parlance, to be helpable is not only to *have* help available, but also to be able to *receive* help, to integrate it, and to build on it.

### ***Gratitude***

This year has been a season of losses I could not have fathomed at this time last year. This congregation saw to it that I was fed and transported

for a month when I had surgery in March. And when our son Aaron died, in July, yours were the arms that held my family and me. You continue to take us where we are, and hold us in our grief, and care for us. And it is not just my generation or the elders of this congregation who enliven our *kehillah kedoshah*, not just the incredible clergy and staff. It is also your children who do this. From their teens through their mid-thirties your children are able to engage because they grew up in *this* holy community. Their presence is a tremendous gift of our *collective* making.

If we are all made in G-d's image, then I say to you "*Modah ani lefanecha,*" *Grateful am I before you.* For this community has schooled me in being present **as I am**, in receiving and not just doing. And so, this is my thank you note to you for being my *kehillah kedoshah*, for teaching me the life-changing lesson of being helpable.

L'Shana Tova