

Rosh Hashana 5779 D'rash

Ruth Spear

L'shana Tova.

For me, Judaism means communities of friends for me and for my family... and holidays that pop up at the most inconvenient times.... It means studying at Torah Study and in the Rabbis' classes. And most of all, it means Tikkun Olam, working to make the world a better place with a community of like-minded people.

My parents were German Jewish refugees. They came to the United States in 1938 on a tourist visa. While they were here two things happened: Kristallnacht and the German government accused them of taking money out of Germany. They could not go back to Germany because the charge that Jews had taken money out of Germany carried the death penalty. My parents were granted asylum but were not given work permits so they had to work illegally because they had not actually taken any money with them.

Eventually my father was allowed to join the United States army and the army brought my parents to Pittsburg, California. I was born on the army base. My parents considered not raising their children as Jews to protect us from anti-Semitism but decided that hiding their Jewish heritage had not worked for Jews in Germany, so they felt it was better for us to know and be proud that we are Jewish.

My parents decided to stay in Pittsburg after the war. I grew up attending Sunday School at our small, Conservative congregation. Our religious school was so pitiful that each year we would start anew on the Hebrew alphabet and only make it half way through. By the time I was a teenager I was a full teacher, even though my religious school education was limited and my teaching skills non-existent.

I came to Cal in time for the Free Speech Movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement and got involved in both. The most important part of my college education was at political rallies and marches rather than in the classroom. Once, I was in a group, riding the bus to Jack London Square to picket restaurants who were not hiring Black people. The white bus driver said to us, "If you don't like this country, leave it." I was shocked. I believed and still believe that if someone loves their country, they should want to make it more a more just place. After college I went to law school with the naive intent to make the world a better place. I found my calling in the Public Defender's office and then in private practice specializing in representing poor criminal and juvenile clients.

Like many of you, I joined Beth El, not for a religious experience, but for services for our children—Camp Kee Tov, religious school, and nursery school. I got all of those things at Beth

El but, even more important, I learned about Judaism, sometimes with joy and sometimes with annoyance. For example, when my son went to Nursery School at Beth El, I kvelled hearing him sing Jewish songs, but I also had to scramble to find childcare because of Jewish holidays that I had never heard of before.

About 30 years ago, a congregant, Shirley Issel, started the homeless meal at Beth El. Her plan was to get it up and running and then it would somehow run itself. We still serve essentially the same meal that she planned. But it could never work without someone in charge. Ellie Erikson Goldstein, Adele Amodeo and I took over, not because someone elected us to do it, but because the work just had to be done.

A friend told me about Torah Study. I dropped in one Saturday morning in the library of the old building and then started reading the Torah for the first time. I found that this ancient document contained some wonderful advice on how to live a just life: Torah tells not to harvest the corners of our fields so the poor can get food there—in today's terms that means feed and housing those in need. Torah tells us that even our slaves should have a day of rest—we all cherry pick the parts of the Torah to live by--- this tells us that we should support a livable minimum wage for all. Torah requires that the land be allowed to lie fallow in the seventh year. That tells us that we need to protect the earth from pollution and make changes to reduce global warming.

I am telling you my story because on my way back from the Religious Action Center day of lobbying in Sacramento a friend asked me why I do the volunteer work I do and why I spent my career representing poor, underrepresented people. All I could say that day is that is just what I do. I had never asked myself that question.

Upon reflection, I see how all the threads of my life lead to pursuing justice for the most vulnerable among us. Growing up the child of refugees, attending Cal at that most exciting time, and studying Torah with some of you have all made me who I am. Beth El's motto is from Deuteronomy: "Justice, justice shall you pursue." For me, that is the essence of Judaism.

I cannot give up this opportunity to speak to you without asking you to do something. No I am not asking for money this time. The Beth El Civic Engagement Team is conducting a voter registration drive. If you are not registered to vote, please register during the holidays. If you are already registered, we would like you to sign a pledge to vote and then to really vote in the upcoming election and every. You will find a registration table in front of the Beit Midrash after this service. Our goal is 100% turnout on November 6th.