

My Journey

Good morning and good yontov. Recently, I was filling out a questionnaire and there was a section about religion. One question asked: “How important is religion in your life?” The first time I answered this questionnaire was six years ago. My response is much easier today because of my experience being a member of this congregation. The question is from Pathways, a study on breast cancer survivorship. More on that later...

My Jewish identity is rooted in my family originating from a small shtetl in Poland and Odessa. I was fortunate to know all of my grandparents and have many memories of spending time with them as a young girl. I was born and raised in LA. I attended nursery school at the Hollywood Los Feliz Jewish Community Center. My first teacher Mona, taught me great songs and dances (in case you’re wondering, she and I are still friends on Facebook!). Later, I attended Knesset Israel, a conservative temple a few miles from my home in Los Feliz. I recall the days leading up to becoming a bat mitzvah. Less about the studying and more about frantically finishing the details of my 3, yes 3 parties. It was, in true LA style, a blowout event. But this is not what the experience means to me now. As the mother of 2 girls, one of whom just got her bat mitzvah date, I have a different attitude. It’s about the journey.

I recently met with Rabbi Mike (our new director of education). He shared with me the teachings of Mordecai Kaplan. Kaplan says that there are three ways of identifying Judaism: behaving, believing and belonging. My Jewish identity is rooted in belonging to the Beth El community.

When I was 35, Beth El became more than just a place to bring my children for nursery school. I was diagnosed with breast cancer and had to go through 6 months of chemo, a bilateral mastectomy and a hysterectomy. My girls were 5 and 14 months. It was a very scary and trying time for my family. The vulnerability pushed us to open ourselves to this community. We were met with open arms. Homemade meals, handmade earrings (in pink) to help counterbalance the bald head, playdates, fresh from the oven challah from the girls teachers, it never ended. My family was, and continues to be, so grateful for the sense of belonging we’ve felt since this time in our life.

My relationship with Beth El goes back farther than when my girls attended BENS. I was an observer of the nursery school, through the eyes of my mom. She was teaching in the Alef class when I graduated college, with a team of teachers who quickly became her soul sisters. They have been best friends now for 27 years. The strong sense of community I witnessed in my mom and her friends left a lasting impression. I remember longing for my own soul sisters and craved a sense of belonging with likeminded women. In July of 2011, nine years into my married life and with my girls aged 6 and 3, Jason and I accepted an invitation to go camping with 9 families. I had no idea at the time, but this began my adult Jewish life with friends. I felt as though the search for a sense of belonging was finally over. I’ve since grown deeply in love with

my own chavurah the moms, dads AND children. We now gather together regularly for Shabbat and other Jewish holidays. The sense of belonging continues to grow deeper.

This time last year, I chose to observe Rosh Hashannah in an untraditional way. Along with 12 other cancer survivors, I spent a week in Moab, Utah learning how to rock climb. First Descents organizes outdoor adventures for cancer survivors. Seriously, if you know any young adult cancer survivors, run don't walk and tell them about First Descents. On one of our final 2 nights, we were treated to an insanely delicious and beautiful dinner at a ranch on the river in Castle Valley. It happened to also be Erev Rosh Hashannah. So, at a cowboy ranch in the middle of the La Salle Valley, I rustled up some apples and honey and shared the traditions of Rosh Hashanah with my climbing buddies. I reflected on two journeys my breast cancer journey, and another year of the Jewish calendar. Another year of reaching new milestones, growing older, and hopefully a little wiser.

Life isn't lived in a straight line. You may make mistakes, you may suffer an illness, and you learn from those events. My treatment for breast cancer became a journey. Each year as the high holidays approach, I am reminded of this journey, and the journey of my life. When I see it from this perspective, I am grateful to be here, with my husband by my side, watching my now 7 & 10 year old girls grow into smart, strong, caring and beautiful young women. I see how they have been shaped by their strong sense of Jewish values. Values that emphasize empathy towards others and kindness in all relationships. I couldn't be more proud.

Shanah Tovah!