

My Jewish Identity - Rosh HaShanah 2015

By Jim Gilbert

When Rabbi Kahn invited me to speak to you today and I started thinking about the origin and development of my Jewish identity, it became clear that growing up in Los Angeles played a significant role in shaping my Jewish experience and self-perception. I bounced that idea off my brother, who observed that “being Jewish in LA, particularly West LA, meant we didn't develop much of a minority consciousness. It felt normal and absolutely unexceptional to be Jewish.”

That made sense to me and comported with my experience. As a child, my friends came from many backgrounds, but there were always significant numbers of Jewish kids and families around, a fact that grounded me, afforded opportunities for community building and allowed me to explore my Jewish heritage.

The annual Walk for Israeli Independence Day that took place in the 1970s and 80s was a major event that drew thousands of people and captured a lot of media attention. My friends and I would meet at Rancho Park and then walk many miles together as a group, eating lunch at Cantors or some other Jewish restaurant on Fairfax and feeling proud to support Israel in such a public and communal way.

Equally as important to the development of my Jewish identity was the household I grew up in. My parents created a Jewish home for my brothers and me, affiliated with a congregation and made it possible for us to participate in a wide variety of positive Jewish experiences.

I grew up at Leo Baeck Temple, a reform congregation led by Rabbi Leonard Beerman, Rabbi Sandy Ragins and Cantor William Sharlin. As I went through religious school I got to know each of these men and over time, realized how very fortunate I was to be led and taught by them.

Rabbi Beerman challenged me to think critically about Israel, inspired me to live up to the Jewish value of Tikkun Olam and modeled how to live an engaged Jewish life committed to social justice. I was proud to be his congregant and often moved by his powerful sermons.

Rabbi Ragins connected to me on a personal level and was there for me at key life events. He officiated my Bar Mitzvah, visited me and other Leo Baeck students at UC Santa Cruz and co-officiated my wedding. He taught me that my relationship with my rabbi could transcend congregational life.

Cantor Sharlin loved Jewish liturgical music and was a masterly composer and arranger. He also transmitted his joy of music to his congregation.

As a young person I struggled to connect to the Jewish tradition through prayer. I still do. There's just too much God talk for me.

But Jewish music, whether original compositions or traditional prayers set to a memorable melody, has a way of speaking to me. I owe Cantor Sharlin a debt of gratitude for that.

As a young person, I participated in many Jewish programs and activities. Like a lot of kids, summer camp was a highlight of my year. I attended Camp Hess Kramer in Malibu and Camp Swig here in the Bay Area. Every year I met kids who grew up in communities with few to no other Jews. For them, being surrounded by other Jewish campers – recognizing that there are others like themselves - moved them in ways that was unfamiliar to me. That realization helped me appreciate that where I live matters when it comes to being Jewish and that going forward, a key criteria for choosing my home town would be the existence and vitality of its Jewish community.

For the past four years my family and I have lived here in Berkeley. While we didn't move to the city for the Jewish community, my wife and I both knew we'd affiliate with a congregation and work to rebuild the Jewish life that we'd left behind in southern California. While still a work in progress, each year brings us closer to our goal of connection.

Although the scale of Berkeley's Jewish life and culture is smaller than LA's, being Jewish here feels equally as normal and unexceptional. There are many other Jews living here and whether they affiliate or not, their presence is felt in a variety of ways. That's the kind of environment I wanted my children to experience while growing up.

So what does being Jewish mean to me today? First and foremost, it means being part of a community with which I share a history, traditions and life events. It means struggling with belief in God and knowing that in our tradition, that's not only ok, but also expected. It means being a part of a tradition that explicitly values each individual's contribution to improving the world in which we live. It means passing on our traditions to our children. It means egalitarianism. It means leading ones life with honesty, integrity, consideration and respect – in short, being a mensch.

As we gather together for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, I find myself reflecting on these values and their importance in my life, as well as on how I got to where I am today. This is the time of year I am reminded that who I am and how I conduct my life are outgrowths of my Jewish upbringing and the choices that I make everyday. I am also reminded that place matters when it comes to shaping identity.

I am grateful that our tradition sets aside time each year to examine my life and seek forgiveness from those I have wronged. However you approach the High Holidays, I wish you peace in the coming year and compassion towards yourself and others.

L'shana tovah