

YOM KIPPUR SYMPOSIUM

These are the four presentations by Beth Israel congregants given at this year's Yom Kippur Symposium. We thank each of our presenters for sharing their life stories concerning, *What Judaism Means To Me*, and enriching our Yom Kippur experience with their personal reflection on this holiest day.

Stephan Wexler is a native Houstonian and retired plastic surgeon. He has been a member of Beth Israel for almost 50 years. He presently is a medical-legal consultant for the law firm of Houssiere, Durant & Houssiere while finishing law school at South Texas College of Law.

Shalom. L'Shanah Tovah. Good afternoon, Thank you for coming, and, more importantly, thank you for staying.

When Rabbi Lyon asked if I would be one of the Yom Kippur Symposium speakers, I said I would be honored. After hanging up, I paused. I had that weird feeling, I could hear Rod Serling from the Twilight Zone, a good Reform Jew by the way, narrating the twists and turns in my life.

Most of the people who speak at the Symposium have endured more than their share of ups and downs.

I suppose it was my turn to get in line.

So as I speak, just imagine my life on the Twilight Zone.

Toward the end of the service, every week, Rabbi Lyon tells us: "Life is a journey and death a destination." When I first met with Rabbi Lyon, I told him that I had always interpreted that line for me as, "Life is a roller coaster and death is when it's time to get off." Imagine my surprise when he told me he had already written an article with that title. He's always one step ahead.

My topic is Judaism in my life. For me, Judaism is really my personal relation with God and the memories I carry for life.

I'm a native Houstonian. I would say I grew up in a typical Jewish household, but then, what is typical? One of the great things about growing up Jewish is the way memories are created and how, when we get older, we try to create moments that will then become warm memories for our children.

You know you're Jewish if you're as tall as your grandmother when you're eight years old.

I remember my Grandmother Mathilde, short, built like a fireplug. She used to chase me around the house trying to get me to eat bananas and cream. To this day, it is the only flavor of yogurt I can't stand.

Early on, this is in the 1950s, I was the poster child for ADD. I was kicked out of every nursery school I attended. So, yes, it is possible to become something good even if you are ADD.

I attended Beth Yeshurun until fifth grade. One of the best parts of a Hebrew day school was that I learned to read and write Hebrew. In sixth grade, I entered St. John's and my family started going to the old Beth Israel on San Jacinto. I was a typical, reluctant Sunday School student. After Sunday school, we often took the bus downtown to James Coney Island across from Foley's and then went to the movies at the Metropolitan Theatre on Main Street.

I had my Bar Mitzvah with Rabbi Schachtel. At that time, I was one of the few that actually read their entire Torah portion. I remember the speaker was Alfred Neumann, Dean of the University of Houston. I was a little disappointed, I thought it was the character from Mad magazine.

For the most part, life was very good. But like today, we were in a war that was not good.

My parents worried about me, the hippie in training, a revolutionary with a cause. When I was 16, my parents decided to send me to survival school at Colorado Outward Bound.

If anything should happen and I ended up in Vietnam, they wanted me to have some survival skills.

Outward Bound was my first experience with God. Part of Outward Bound was the three-day-solo. I don't know how it is today, but in 1968, they took you out to a mountain, and left you totally alone for three days. You had the clothes on your back and three matches and you had to survive. It was during that three day period that, for me, I first began to understand something about the concept of God.

Maybe it was not eating for three days. I don't know, but it was then that I felt the spirit of a Supreme Being. I knew my life would be a roller coaster of formidable challenges, but that anything was possible.

After graduating from St. John's, I went to College at Tulane. Trust me, New Orleans was a great as the stories you've heard. Then in 1973, I saw the movie *The Paper Chase*, a story about a first-year law student at Harvard. And there he was; my challenges had a name- Professor Kingsfield, the tyrannical Contracts professor. My life became a quest for Professor Kingsfield.

I knew then I would someday go to law school. But for the time being, I had already decided to go to medical school.

I finished medical school at the University of Texas in San Antonio. I had dabbled in karate on and off, but in San Antonio, I began to seriously study TKD. I started training at one of the tougher schools in the city while finishing medical school. I then started fighting full contact.

Then came my second conversation with God. I had fought a few fights and done pretty well. I remember my last fight. It lasted two minutes. I must have been thinking about an upcoming test. I swear, that foot came out of nowhere. I was knocked out and came to after a few seconds.

It was then that God spoke to me. "You must be out of your mind." I heard Him loud and clear. My full contact days were over.

I then came to Houston for my surgery residency and met the real Professor Kingsfield- Dr. DeBakey. The experience matched the legend. Some of my greatest memories are getting yelled at by DeBakey. Trust me, after that, there is nothing I can't take.

Fast forward 10 years. I finished my plastic surgery residency and began work as the plastic surgeon at McGregor Clinic. My office was a few doors down from my father. I know how proud he was of me, but at that time, I was convinced he was just keeping an eye on me.

For me, plastic surgery – what could be better?

Over an 18 year career, I had one of the busiest practices in the city. I was booked three months ahead. Life was great. But I was still ADD. I couldn't just do one thing.

For 20 years, I had wanted to be a screenwriter. I went to the Sundance Film Festival every year. I attended screenwriting conventions, and took writing courses.

I told my friends if I could make 50% as a writer of what I made as a plastic surgeon, I was out of here.

But God had other plans. The second half of my life was about to begin. Over a year or two, I noticed it was harder to button my shirt collars. I thought I was just gaining weight. I started having neck pain, but I thought it was from doing too many surgeries. Then my surgeries started taking longer. I thought I was just getting slow as I got older. It's amazing how much denial we can come up with.

Then, in December, 2000, I started dropping instruments in surgery and I knew something was wrong. I had an MRI and went to see my neurosurgeon. It was one of those out of body experiences as I floated in the room. I watched me sitting on the exam table as my doctor told me it was one of the larger tumors in the spinal cord in the neck he'd seen in a while, in someone that was still walking.

The good news was that I was going to live. The bad news was that I would probably never operate again.

In the span of two weeks, everything was gone. I closed my practice and let my staff go.

I had two big operations; I couldn't use my right arm and hand; I had trouble walking. In the middle of this, I got divorced. What was I going to do?

It was then that I had my third conversation with God. His words flowed through me.

I didn't so much hear Him as understood Him. "Time to put up or shut up." The second half of my life was beginning.

I spent a year exercising and training to get back what I could. I had always lived life full speed ahead. Now, it was just a matter of one foot in front of the other. I had always wanted to write and direct and now I got my chance. Working with my friends from Sundance, I

spent a year flying between Vegas, Houston and Los Angeles. It was great but, if I was going to do it full time, I had to move out to Los Angeles and I wasn't ready for that. So I decided to stay in Houston.

God blessed me with two great boys. Noah and Logan, both wonderful, but different as night and day. As an example, Noah's Bar Mitzvah was smooth as silk. The party planning was as expected. He did a great job. He read beautifully from the Torah. I was never worried.

Logan's Bar Mitzvah - totally different story. The morning of the Bar Mitzvah, we were late as usual. Driving down Braeswood to Temple, a train came. I know God planned it. As we sat at the track, I realized I forgot Logan's speech at home. I told him we could go back to get it, and be REALLY late or he could try to get by without it. Logan smiled and said he could wing it. Logan also did a great job.

I knew God was speaking to me through him.

I had taken screenwriting classes from Sam Havens who was the head of the Drama Department at St. Thomas. While I was recovering, I ran into Sam at the Kroger's. We talked for a while and he suggested I come to St. Thomas since I wasn't doing anything. Two years later, I got my Masters Degree in Theatre. During that time, I ran into my future wife, Deasa, also at the Kroger's. Deasa had just moved back to Houston after 20 years acting in Los Angeles. I asked her to read for my Master Play. She agreed. As the song goes, "One thing leads to another."

We were married the next year at Sundance. Through me, God had a plan for Deasa as well.

I had raised two wonderful boys; suddenly, I woke up one morning and Turner was in our bed, staring at me. I thought to myself, I already did this. I'm sure God was laughing. But I was ready to do it again.

For me, returning to school was Nirvana- my brain couldn't stop. I was like an exercise addict in the gym. I went on to get my MBA. Now, 35 years later, Professor Kingsfield called to me again. I'm now finishing law school at South Texas. I promised Deasa this was my last degree – Bar Be Que University.

There have been great miracles in my life.

Three years ago, my mother was in a bad wreck. She is now the oldest survivor of three months in the shock trauma ICU at Hermann. The doctors and nurses were great. My father spent the three months at her bedside. Knowing what we knew medically, he and I complained about things several times. We were kicked out of the ICU a few times. It was like being sent to the principal's office, a common occurrence for me, but a new experience for my father.

During her stay, I remember one of the doctors coming out and telling us how worried he was because she wasn't following commands. We quickly responded that he better come up with another test because she'd never followed commands. I had a chill up my back as I knew then that God was smiling and she would be OK.

But there has also been great tragedy.

In 2001, my nephew Brandon drowned. I know it has been incredibly hard for my sister and brother-in-law, Shelley and David, and Andrea and Jeremy, to carry on and I am always amazed at their strength. In 2003, my brother Darryl died from AIDS. His partner, Howard, has been a source of strength and will always remain a part of our family.

Then four years ago, I was back at M.D. Anderson with cancer. I had spent a year at Anderson doing a fellowship in Head and Neck. Now I was back after 20 years, this time as a patient.

That was my Fourth conversation with God. As I sat there before surgery, I felt God talking to me. "Get over it. This is nothing compared to what you've been through." And I knew He was right.

And then, just as I thought everything was back to normal, last week, I forgot to study for my stress test. I flunked big time. Friday, I had a stent put in. When I woke up, Dr. Solomon, my cardiologist smiled and said, "You should do fine. We had to put in the biggest stent made."

How typical. I could hear God laughing.

Now, I speak to God twice a day. Every morning and every night, I thank Him for the extra day He has given me, because I know that that each day of my life is a gift.

It is as a Jew that I came to personally know God. We each have one day at a

time. Enjoy it.

Today, we ask God to forgive our mistakes and seal us in the Book of Life for the coming year.

Remember, you don't have to wait a whole year for Yom Kippur to talk to God. He waits to hear from us every day.

Go ahead and speak to Him. You might be surprised at what He says. Sometimes He speaks directly, sometimes a subtle sign. Just keep your mind open. For me, fortunately, life is still a roller coaster. I don't know when my roller coaster is coming to a stop.

But when it does, I will thank God for the greatest ride ever.

Deborah Buks

Deborah Buks is a public relations consultant whose happiest moments are spent with her sons Joseph and Isaac, cycling a country road or enjoying the companionship of friends.

Deborah is President and founder, Ward Creative Communications, a marketing public relations firm.

I was born in 1960 to a depression-era mother whose parents arranged her marriage to my father, a Cherokee Indian. Despite a marriage of struggle, alcoholism and abuse, Grandma warned her, "Don't you dare divorce him or you'll shame us in this town." Twenty-one years later, shortly after I was born the youngest of six children, Mom drove from the funeral home after arranging Grandma's burial, to a divorce attorney. My father soon remarried a widow.

At three years old, I gained not a step-mother, but an Other Mother, a wise, warm, wonderful woman and three siblings. My two mothers became close friends. Mom took her church pianist skills to the Baptist church thinking it more liberal than her mother's strict, chaotic, speaking-in-tongues Pentecostal church.

Uneducated but hardworking, Mom soon re-married too – mostly for survival – to an alcoholic truck driver. Church attendance was no longer a priority. By third grade, I began pressuring Mom to attend the Baptist church that had begun meeting at my school. Though I yearned to discover G-d, I learned quickly that questioning was not welcome when I

asked my Sunday school teacher, the wife of preacher Brother Bill, who Cain had married since G-d had only made four people so far. If her spray-netted red hair could have stood any higher on her teased head, it surely would have as she snorted out her pencil-thin nose, "How dare you question the word of God!" That afternoon Brother Bill and his wife paid my parents a visit about "my behavior."

Inspired to bring me up on the straight and narrow, my mother built a life for us that revolved around the church: Sunday school and church services where we sang hymns of appreciation that Amazing Grace had saved a wretch like me; Sunday evening fellowship; Tuesday night visitation, where we proselytized door-to-door in an attempt to have our neighbors repent their sins and ask Jesus to save them; Wednesday night prayer meeting; Friday night youth services; and, summer missionary trips and church camp.

All the while, though I knew better than to ask aloud, I wrestled with the idea of a G-d who made me in His image and yet, at some unknown time, had deemed me a worthless sinner who needed forgiveness to be allowed back into His grace, which I asked for at age 12. Now baptized in the blood of the lamb and therefore safe from burning in hell for all eternity, I still wondered, "When was the turning point exactly? When had I been forsaken by G-d?"

Despite church life, home life, with an alcoholic step-father whose inebriation allowed him to take liberties and a mother afraid she couldn't raise her three youngest children on her own, turned me into an expert survivor myself. For my own safety, it became imperative I never be home alone – that I be the best at everything I tried so I would be sure to make the volleyball team, the debate team, the cheerleading squad – and earn the long, away-from-home hours that came with them, till I convinced her at age 16 that the two of us could make it if we both worked.

She agreed, bought a trailer house, and finally, we left. Straight A's, scholarships and work-study programs were my tickets to The University of Texas where I became the first in my family to attend college. I abandoned the Baptist church then, opting to sleep in instead, and met one of my best friends to this day, a Jewish girl from Tucson.

My be-the-best survival strategy served me well as I graduated in 1982 in an economy much like the one we're in now, and became one of the few in my class to snare a job in my field of study – public relations. With the struggles of the past behind me, I experienced life as good. A girl wonder in every firm that recruited me, I rose to become the youngest vice president in the history of the then-world's largest public affairs firm.

My step-sister Cindy, who'd become my closest friend growing up, and I went in search of a religion that made sense to us – visiting congregations of every faith. Unitarian held promise but replacing Jesus with Thoreau and Emerson proved, well, guilt-producing. When we found Unity Church, which taught a metaphysical interpretation of Jesus as a way-shower who saved us from thinking we were somehow separate from G-d – whose divinity resided within each of us – we agreed, this felt right.

Cindy has since spent the last 23 years there as executive director of the church, while I became a youth leader for middle-schoolers as I built a business of my own, and serial-dated through the next decade. Unity provided the support we needed when my father took his own life and my oldest step-sister, an actress and model, lived brain-injured and paralyzed after flying through a windshield – not wanting to wrinkle her dress with a seat belt – until she, too, found handicapped life unbearable.

At 36, I met Eric, a Polish Jew 11 years my senior and father to a beautiful 10-year-old daughter. He swept me off my feet in a whirlwind romance of charm and flattery and proposed in just 10 months in a Paris bistro. He'd told me how his Polish Catholic mother Kazmiera, at age 11, had been taken to Matthausen, the cruelest of concentration camps, with her mother, after Nazis shot her father in their living room. And how at age 18, after being freed by the Allied Forces, she met and married Joseph, Eric's Polish Jewish father who'd been fighting alongside his brother Icek (Polish for Isaac), with the Russians. But the war didn't end for Poles, as the Communists took control, and unraveled the long history of Jews flourishing in Poland.

In the late 1960s, good Catholic neighbors reported the Buks family for practicing Judaism in their home, and soon Party members hauled Joseph to prison

and took possession of the family's land, home, cars and personal items – even the family dog. Given hours and a single suitcase per family member to leave the country, Eric, at age 17, fled to Israel where he was granted assimilation into a kibbutz while his parents and two sisters immigrated to Italy and, finally, to settle in Boston. Eric found work on a ship and eventually made his way to Texas which he'd believed to be home to his American hero, John Wayne – and the place he could be in control of his life as a Jew.

Eager to have the home and bond each of my long-married sisters had created, I agreed to raise our children Jewish, and then proceeded to, what else, be the best almost-Jewish mother I could be. I read countless books on Judaism, Jewish weddings, conversion and raising Jewish children; took inter-faith couples and Basic Judaism classes; and, attended Shabbat Services. Just 20 months after meeting, we were married by the only Rabbi in town who'd marry us, under a chuppah at the Junior League, because even he wouldn't marry us in a synagogue.

In a single year, I planned a Jewish wedding and a Bat Mitzvah – a sort of Jewish baptism by fire – and immediately after, we began building a custom home, which turned into the City of Bellaire's longest home construction on record and a legal nightmare as our builder absconded with \$100,000 in bank draws.

On June 22nd, 1999, on the first happiest day of my life, my son Joseph was born, and I hoped the duress and expense of the past two years – and the stress on our marriage – was behind us. I conducted two post-C-section brises without a Bubbe to guide me, instituted Shabbat dinners in our new home, prepared Seders on my own, learned holiday recipes online, and was probably the only Shlenker mother eager for blue bags and folders to come home stuffed with the equivalent of pre-school Cliff's Notes on every Jewish holiday and simple Hebrew lessons.

I settled into a Jewish life, and found myself giving away my Christmas tree as the rituals and meanings of Jewish holidays and prayers began to have personal meaning for me. When people asked, "Oh, are you Jewish?" integrity reigned in my instinct to say yes, but inside I felt compromised. With the birth of my second son, Isaac, on the next happiest day

of my life, and a life filled with friends, I focused on the joys and G-d's goodness and strength when my 35-year-old niece's breast cancer diagnosis prompted me to get my first mammogram at age 41.

With an all-clear, I began self-exams and immediately found a likely swollen mammary gland that had limited my breast milk. What would follow that discovery would be a downward spiral I now see G-d had been preparing me to survive all along. Diagnosed with Sarcoma, a rare cancer of the connective tissue, and less than one % of all cancers, I was suddenly ripped from my life to become one of about 10,000 people a year diagnosed with an aggressive disease too rare to be profitable for any pharmaceutical. With a two-year-old and a six-month-old baby, my good Jewish doctor, the world's leading Sarcoma specialist, gave me a five % chance of survival for five years if treatment proved unsuccessful.

A year-and-a-half of chemo, radiation and surgeries left me barely ambulatory at times, but made me the recipient of infinite mitzvot from Jewish mothers I barely knew. Looking death squarely in the eye, I recalled the Unity minister's sermon on disease, or dis-ease as he called it, and vowed not to "battle" cancer but to choose life as G-d urges in Deuteronomy. I began actively to let go of stress and chaos in my life. I blessed and forgave my tumor, and the stressful events and people leading up to it. I meditated, "There is no spot where the whole of G-d is not." I gave permission to the runaway cells to Let Go . . . and Let G-d.

In Jerusalem at the Western Wall, I stuffed a prayer for all Sarcoma patients into a crevice, and whispered Shema as if it were my own, willing G-d to listen. No longer living the illusion of the undiagnosed that there is always tomorrow to do the right thing, to love and be loved, to pursue a dream, I prayed that G-d would allow me to walk Joseph and Isaac into their first days of Kindergarten, and vowed to live a life of service.

To this day, as I stand here showing no evidence of disease since 2003, Sarcoma patients come in and out of our lives at Hotel Buks, or perhaps more aptly, Hospice Buks; I serve on boards of Sarcoma advocacy and research nonprofits alongside my oncologist, and participate on the Temple Website Committee, do room mother duty for 5th

grade, and corral Cub Scouts as a Pack 806 den leader. With the clarity that my life had become precious, I realized death had given me life – abundantly – and chose that, given the opportunity to rebuild my physical and financial health, I would either create a happy marriage through counseling or choose a co-parenting friendship with my husband.

Despite marriage counseling, a trusting and respectful relationship was not to be had, and 2007 turned into a year of terror for me. Then on November 13th at 3:00 p.m., discovery was exchanged between our divorce attorneys. Eighteen hours later, my husband dropped our two sons at the Shlenker carpool, drove to his office, pulled a gun from his safe and brought his life to a violent end.

In the dark vacuum of the next hours, Rabbi Lyon and Cantor Gerber gave me the words to give my sons. In the Shlenker counselor's office, with my sisters, Ricki Komiss and Karen Miller, I spoke the most difficult words I have ever delivered – to Joseph and Isaac, "Daddy is dead." The following days blurred as Cantor Gerber became the boys' and my only voice in the funeral, and temple and Shlenker families, along with my own family, friends, clients and employees, enveloped us.

With their support, and counseling, our little family of three has emerged stronger and wiser, healing more every day. As happiness and hope increasingly displace fear-filled days of angst, we are creating new traditions with the help of Jewish families who remember we need seats at a Seder table and a break-fast gathering. And with the opening to start life anew, I seized the freedom and safe place to claim Judaism as my own, without my decision being characterized as being about my husband or children, or a divorce ploy. Originally scheduled for the day Ike struck, my November 7th conversion, and first mikvah became the holiest and most joyful of days as the Torah portion read "leave your home and your father's house and go to the land I will show you, where I will make you a great nation and bless you."

And so G-d has. Today, my sons and I live in peace and love and tenderness, our hope-filled hearts open to silliness, wonder, gratitude, and the infiniteness of G-d's love. On this holiest of days, I also wish for you such Shalom.

Marcia Nichols

In addition to the responsibilities of her busy family, Marcia Nichols chairs Beth Israel's Youth Committee and, with her husband Michael, is leading the Beth Israel trip to Israel this spring.

September 23, 1976. Erev Rosh Hashanah ushered in the beginning of another spiritual New Year for Jews all over the world.

For me, it was the day I married my husband Mike. We were married in a brief, civil ceremony, conducted by his law school professor, held in small and dimly lit chambers adjacent to the criminal court in Fulton County, Georgia. To both of us, it had seemed like the only way to circumvent the many difficult, painful, and irresolvable issues that accompanied our decision to become life partners. For two people for whom "INNER" faith mattered more than "INTER faith," we were at a loss about how to have a religiously meaningful wedding ceremony.

Although we had not known each other very long, we quickly learned that the term "mixed marriage" now applied to us in some unrecognizable way.

Now fast-forward 33 years, a third of a century. Six weeks ago, our daughter Jessica entered into a "mixed marriage."

In 1976, Mike and I eloped after knowing each other for only 16 weeks.

In 2009, Jessica and Alex made the thoughtful decision to join their lives as husband and wife after spending almost three years together.

In 1976, Mike and I were married in that brief and uninspiring civil ceremony.

In 2009, Jessica and Alex were married standing beside the beautiful Weber River under the bluest skies in Oakley, Utah as the sun sparkled off the rippling water.

In 1976, Mike and I stood alone and recited vows hastily pulled from a judicial manual. The singular witness to the moment – the judge's secretary whom we had met only seconds before.

In 2009, Jessica and Alex helped craft a wedding ceremony utilizing spiritual language that was unifying, embracing, and expressive of their individuality. They signed a ketubah, with wording of their own choosing, and were surrounded by their loving friends,

family and dog Tala.

In 1976, no rabbi would marry us.

In 2009, Jessica and Alex stood under a chuppah as Congregation Beth Israel's Rabbi Mark Miller conducted the ceremony. They were wrapped in her 97-year-old grandfather's prayer shawl and were touched and blessed by parents, siblings, and other family members who represented a spiritual tapestry of Jews, Catholics, Presbyterians, Mormons and Buddhists, all brought together by love.

As I stood there, I recognized that although they were wrapped in someone else's prayer shawl, Jessica and Alex were not being wrapped in someone else's choices or anyone else's decisions or assumptions. I recognized, too, the tremendous distances Reform Judaism and I both have traveled in those 33 years.

How has my personal journey taken me from my Christian roots to where I stand here today, addressing you on the holiest day of the Jewish year as a member of this Jewish community?

When Mike and I were married on Erev Rosh Hashanah, 1976, I had little knowledge and no personal experience with the High Holidays. Imagine how surprised and intimidated I was when we walked into the Nichols' home to share our exciting news, and I found the house brimming with guests enjoying Manischewitz wine and anticipating a wonderful pre-Rosh Hashanah dinner. I think those people would have been less surprised if Elijah had walked in the door.

The next morning, I was at the Temple, seated next to my husband of 18 hours during Rosh Hashanah services. I felt like a spiritual tourist. Having never set foot inside a temple, I now was ticketed into a world of prayer shawls, prayer books that opened right to left, yarmulkes, and the sounds of Hebrew prayers. I felt like Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole. And I admit I was thinking less about having said, "I do" and more about "What have I done?"

But then the Hebrew recitation of the priestly blessing dissolved into the familiar English benedictory refrain from my childhood, and I heard the words, "May the Lord Bless You and Keep You. . . ." I felt an initial connection and a welcomed glimmer of recognition. I realized that the sounds that only mo-

ments before seemed foreign held a meaning that I actually already owned. I felt like the Rabbi had tossed me a linguistic key and that the doors were there for me to open. It took a little while, but I did.

Four years later, with the impending birth of our first child, we enrolled in a basic Judaism class. We agreed that our child, if it were a boy, would have a bris. And as the big day approached, I wanted to become more comfortable with the basic tenets of Judaism and to support Mike.

On the first night of the class, I made it quite clear to Rabbi Davidow that I had no plans to convert. I thought the classes were stimulating and the Old Testament discussions reminded me of the Sunday school classes of my childhood. As the weeks progressed, the rabbi became my friend and spiritual guide. I was taken with his honesty and humor, and his willingness to admit that there would always be more questions than answers. I did my introspective homework and worked to be unafraid to examine my own belief system. I discussed my willingness to foster Judaism as our family's spiritual language. And I shared with the rabbi my belief that to be spiritually whole I had to continue to claim and honor my own religious roots.

I remain uncomfortable with the word "conversion." To me, it conjures a definitive, almost abrupt departure from some previous path. Re-labeling for procedural purposes seemed to me inauthentic and detrimental. Delving into the subtle beauty of any tradition is a life journey. Dogen, a great Zen teacher, says this: "If you walk in the mist you get wet." . . . In that spirit, Rabbi Davidow allowed me to have a private service in which I read personal vows in which I expressed my willingness to walk in the mist and to grow in awareness of Judaism. At the end of the meaningful ceremony, I was given the Hebrew name . . . Gavriel.

In 1981, Mike and I moved to Houston with our one-year-old son Joshua and joined Beth Israel. Within the year I was pregnant and our second child Lauren Emma Nichols was born. Lauren was born congenitally affected by cytomegalovirus and was blind, deaf and severely handicapped. No parent is prepared for news like this. Beginning life

in a new city is difficult under the best circumstances. The emotional challenges of having recently moved, having a career change to full-time mother, having no local family support system, and having an 18-month-old and a severely brain damaged newborn were almost unbearable.

I remember being in the back yard on Mother's Day, three weeks after Lauren was born, when a neighbor poked her head up over the fence to hand me the heart-shaped cake she had made for me with "Happy Mother's Day" written on it in red icing. The emotional complexity and the pain of that moment was only made better when she intuitively took her finger and wiped it across the cake, leaving only the word "Day." I remember laughing and crying and thinking, "How am I going to get through another day?"

I will forever be grateful that another "spiritual key" was offered to me in the dark days of that Houston summer. Mike's brother Arthur, a trained teacher and practitioner of Vipassana Meditation, called me and insisted that I join him on a meditation course on the banks of Canada's St. Lawrence River. The word "Vipassana" is Pali for "seeing things as they really are." For twelve days there with him, I cried, slept, practiced noble silence, meditated, and learned to watch my breath. As the days passed, I cried less and listened more. I began to understand the universal truths of IMPERMANANCE and SUFFERING as taught by this Buddhist tradition and I returned home with less fear.

Over the years, I have come to recognize that these tenets, IMPERMANANCE and SUFFERING, are as Jewish as they are Buddhist. To me, being an observant Jew is working to be someone who pays attention, who strives to "see things as they really are," and who, as we read in our prayer book, "doesn't walk sightless among miracles."

Lauren died and was buried at the Beth Israel Cemetery on Easter weekend, three weeks before her fourth birthday. Preparing for today, I re-read Rabbi Carol Meyer's eulogy, in which she spoke to the reality that we came to that day from different religious backgrounds." Rabbi Meyer said: "But we come together united by many things: By our love for Lauren, by our belief

that her life was valuable, that she has progressed now, out of her earthly body, to a heavenly existence, a spiritual existence. It is no coincidence that we have come together at this time -Easter time, springtime, a time of re-birth and renewal, symbols of the new life about to begin for the child we loved so well and who taught us so much."

I have never felt more supported than I did that day, and have never appreciated more the bridge that can be constructed by spiritual leaders. Cantor Gerber has never served human need more eloquently than he did at my daughter's funeral as he sang the hymn "How Great Thou Art." Though it is typically associated with Christian worship, Cantor Gerber sang it as comfortably and as lovingly as he recited the Mourner's Kaddish.

The following weekend, after having completed one year preparing for my adult B'Nai Mitzvah, I spoke representing the class at the Saturday morning Shabbat worship service. During that year of learning and of loss, I walked more completely and comfortably through the portals of Judaism. No spiritual journey is a solitary experience and I am deeply grateful to have had wise and compassionate Rabbis and teachers.

Mike and I continued to create a Jewish home, with our other children Josh, Jessica, Zach, and Anna. We combined a healthy mix of curiosity and creativity and developed family rituals and traditions with novel spiritual expression.

Celebrating Chanukah, adorning the yard with dreidles, menorahs, and a large world emblazoned with "Peace On Earth," our family merged religious sentiment with modern sensibilities and had fun in the process. When Mike and I wrote our family Chanukah Book, we created a personal tool that facilitated eight nights of lively discussions about rededication, the timeless issues of religious freedom, and tolerance, and the continual universal struggles for them.

I know we must truly be Reform Jews, because our family's Passover Seder is constantly "reforming." When we heard the story of the disgruntled Rabbi who said not so long ago that a female rabbi on the Bimah would be as ridiculous as an orange on the Seder plate, we put an orange on our Seder

plate and have done so every year since. To us, that Passover orange, sharing the plate with the ancient metaphors of spring, rebirth, and Jewish struggle, symbolizes the changes we are challenged to bring to our tradition. And it attests just as surely to the many changes I have seen with Reform Judaism since I sat in the Temple as a newlywed on Rosh Hashanah 33 years ago. In some ways, I am the orange.

I believe that the unequivocal dictate to create grand new visions is as much mine today, as it was for Moses. I have learned that traveling through uncertain territory takes courage; some visions take longer to materialize, and some doors open less easily and less quickly than I would like.

Three years ago, the interfaith wedding of my son Josh to my daughter-in-law Lelia was co-officiated by her minister and our Cantor Gerber. That beautifully balanced and meaningful ceremony highlighted what unites us spiritually rather than anything that divides us. That door is open today and opening ever more fully.

So, I stand here today, a Reform Jew who is as much about reform as I am about being Jewish. I have tried to stretch Judaism as much as it has stretched me. Like Jews of centuries past, I have been brought to unexpected places, and I have been able to open doors to places that I never expected to explore.

As I reflect on how Judaism has grown in my life, it is fair to say that it has been through an equal share of small moments of enlightenment and moments when I have consciously chosen to make Judaism more meaningful, significant, and vibrant for me.

For me, the process has not been one of watering down Judaism, but rather one of distilling it, until what has been revealed to me is its essence. My quest has been to create a personal spiritual world that encompasses the best of what I know. I have chosen what to take, and what to leave, and it brought me eventually to this point where the new thing feels more like me than the old ever felt.

The Beth Israel Cemetery speaks to me of what is impermanent and what is enduring. Its series of curved walls expresses with subtle sophistication that there are many portals into Judaism. I

am grateful for the door that opened for me many years ago. I am grateful to be a member of the Beth Israel community. On this Yom Kippur, I remain committed to doing my part to ensure Judaism's continued vitality.

— *La Shana Tovah*

Steve Block

Steve Block is a partner in the Real Estate and Banking section of Thompson & Knight, where he serves on the firm's management committee and supervises its New York office.

When Rabbi Lyon invited me to speak today, I responded by asking him the proverbial question that Jews have asked rabbis through the ages: "Why, me?" I told him that Judaism has certainly had a significant role in defining my life, but I also explained that I consider myself to be somewhat spiritually challenged. I assumed that would convince him to withdraw the invitation, but suffice it to say, our rabbi can be very persuasive. So, *hineni* – here I am.

I have always been proud of and comfortable with my Jewish identity – from growing up in Houston as a third generation Beth Israelite to the present time. As far back as I can remember, my parents instilled in me a deep sense of devotion to the Temple. It was a significant part of their lives for many years, and so it has been for me. They were dedicated members of Sisterhood and Brotherhood, respectively, and both of them served as president. Following in their footsteps, I served on various Temple committees and the Board of Trustees for many years.

The privilege to serve as President of the Temple 10 years ago was one of the most meaningful and rewarding experiences of my life. Regular attendance at services and Temple events expanded my knowledge of Judaism. And even more important to me, I formed new relationships and worked with so many wonderful people – all connected by our common heritage and genuine interest in the welfare of this great Congregation.

Yet, active involvement in Temple life did not mean that I had also found the

essence of spiritual faith. While I truly enjoy our beautiful liturgy and music, I have struggled with issues of spiritual faith for many years. For me, Judaism is centered largely around and inseparable from Jewish culture. What most intrigues me is the existence of this worldwide community of people who identify themselves as Jews, and who, on account of that identity, share a unique kinship with one another.

Some 41 years ago, while traveling through the former Soviet Union, I experienced this bond of Jewish kinship in a profound way. It was the summer of 1968 – the height of the Cold War. The Soviet Union was preparing to invade Czechoslovakia. I was on the last leg of an amazing, one-year journey around the world under a fellowship sponsored by Corning Glass Works. The trip had taken me to 45 different countries, including visits to Viet Nam several weeks before the first Tet Offensive and to Israel six months after the end of the 1967 War.

I was 22 years old and traveling alone at the time in a red convertible sports car. Boy, do I miss that car! While on the Greek island of Corfu, I met Steve Golovan, a fellow Jewish traveler from Chicago. Steve was my age, and after the customary game of Jewish geography, we quickly formed a lasting friendship.

On a lark, Steve and I decided it would be really cool to travel through the Soviet Union. So we made our way to Athens, where we applied for the required visas. As many of you will recall, in those years, it was almost impossible for U.S. citizens to get permission to visit the Soviet Union. For that reason, we never actually expected to make the trip. Besides, we were very much aware that our Jewish identities could be obstacles to getting the visas, and even more problematic were we to venture into the country. But to our surprise, in just three days time, we had the necessary visas and were setting out on a three-week car trip through Russia.

Our excitement for the adventure was mixed with a good deal of fear, but we decided not to let such a rare opportunity pass us by. Looking back on that decision, I admit that it was not the smartest one I've ever made, but it proved to be one of the most memorable.

We entered the country across the border from Romania. As you can imag-

ine, our red convertible attracted a lot of attention – something two Jews from America should have known to avoid in that time and place. With crowds gathering around the car at each stop, we had the opportunity to talk with many local citizens along the way. We were exhilarated by these encounters and usually found someone around who spoke English.

Our first destination was the City of Odessa located on the Black Sea. There, we had our first encounter with Soviet Jews. While walking on the beach, we struck up a conversation with an English teacher named Fred, a Soviet Jew who was vacationing with several Jewish friends. Fred explained at some length that all of them desperately wished to emigrate to Israel. As we talked on that sandy beach, two thuggish men approached us and pulled Fred aside. While we could not understand their conversation, Steve and I knew that the situation was tense. After the intruders left, we learned that they had overheard our discussions with Fred about Israel and had warned him not to engage in conversations with foreigners.

When the time came for us to depart, Steve pulled something from his pocket and handed it to Fred. It was a coin, commemorating the establishment of the State of Israel. This simple gesture brought tears to Fred's eyes, and ours, as we went our separate ways.

Later, in the city of Leningrad (now called St. Petersburg), we visited one of the few remaining synagogues in the entire country. We attempted to talk to a group of elderly men who were attending minyan services. In broken English, mixed with some Yiddish words that only Steve understood, they assured us that life was good for Jews in the Soviet Union. But as we continued to talk, we sensed their discomfort in sharing any meaningful or candid remarks. They were obviously worried that someone might be listening, even one of their fellow Jews. Eventually, we were able to talk with some of them privately. In those side bar conversations, they spoke more openly about the difficult times they faced. Among other things, we learned how they struggled to get supplies of Torahs, prayer books and ritual objects. These items were not obtainable in the country and could not be legally imported, so they had to be smuggled in from the

West, which was a dangerous and complicated process.

Needless to say, the Soviet Union was not a very accommodating place for tourists. There was no such thing as a roadside inn or motel; no one was there to “leave the light on” for us. Instead, we stayed at rustic campsites with other tourists, mostly from other Eastern Bloc countries.

Our itinerary was tightly controlled by the government. Upon arriving at each destination, we were required to surrender our passports to the authorities, who held them until the time of our departure. As we prepared to leave the camp in Kiev, we entered the office and approached a woman who was standing behind the counter. There were several other people working nearby. The woman appeared to be in her early 40’s and spoke fluent English.

We announced that we were ready to check out of the camp, and she began processing the paperwork. But before returning our passports, she thumbed through them, carefully scrutinizing the entry stamps of the various countries we had previously visited. When she saw Israeli stamps in our passports, she asked if we were Jewish. We said “yes,” and then somewhat anxiously awaited her response. In a rather matter-of-fact tone of voice, she told us,

“Well, I am Jewish, too. My mother was Jewish; therefore, my identity papers state that my nationality is Jewish – not Lithuanian, which is where I am from. But I don’t know anything about the religion, and I really don’t know what it means to be Jewish.”

Then she handed us our passports and completed the paperwork for our departure. As we were about to leave the office, the woman offered to accompany

us to the car. When we were outside and out of earshot of others, she stopped us. Then, she took each of us firmly by the hand. The matter-of-fact voice she had used just minutes before suddenly shifted to one of heartfelt emotion, as she squeezed our hands and spoke:

“Please give my regards to all Jews in America. You know,” she said, “we Jews must stick together.”

Then she abruptly turned around and headed back towards the office.

The image of that moment is one I will never forget. Its poignancy is embedded in the Jewish heritage we shared with the woman but could not openly discuss. Her words, the emotion in her voice, and the expression on her face revealed that there was much more to her life’s story and her ties to Judaism than she dared to disclose in the confines of the camp’s office.

Coincidentally, some 30 years after my trip to the Soviet Union, my son, Kevin, joined a group of Jewish college students on a mission to Moscow to inform young Russian Jews about the workings of democracy. While there, Kevin’s group attended a ceremony during which the Russian government returned several Torahs to a local synagogue. The Torahs had been confiscated by the communists around the time of the revolution and had been held in storage ever since. The ceremony was attended by a large audience, including the Chief Rabbi of Israel.

At the last minute, Kevin and several of his colleagues were recruited to participate in the ceremony. Their task was to march the Torahs down the center aisle to the front of the auditorium.

So, there was Kevin Block from Houston, Texas, returning sacred Torahs to a Russian synagogue after their absence for many decades. The symbolism of

that act – my son helping to restore the open observance of Judaism in the former Soviet Union – recalls for me the plea of the woman in Kiev and the plight of the old men at the synagogue in Leningrad.

Over the years, I have thought many times about the Soviet Jews I met that summer. The memories of my brief encounters with them are especially meaningful at this time of year as I pause to reflect on my own faith. I remain deeply moved by the stark contrast between the Judaism that shaped my life and theirs.

The kinship I felt with the Soviet Jews that summer is the same sense of kinship I feel towards all Jews. It is grounded in Jewish history and culture. It is manifested by the unspoken understanding, and responsibility, we have for one another based on the mere fact that we are Jews. This connection, this sense of kinship, has been an ongoing source of strength for me and has led me to experience Judaism largely through the prism of cultural connections. The spiritual aspects of Judaism have been more elusive. Yet, I do believe there is a divine reason why Judaism has survived through the years and against the odds.

This belief impels me to continue to keep the faith . . . as do the blessings of my life: Janis, my dancing partner and soul mate of 37 years, our three wonderful children, their spouses and our four cherished grandchildren. I am genuinely thankful for them, for the opportunity to live as a Jew in a free and open society, and for the kinship I have with this congregation and the community of Jews throughout the world.

Remembering the words of the woman in Kiev: May we always stick together as Jews – in this New Year and for generations to come. And, may we all go from strength to strength.

– *L’Shana Tovah*