

“The Only Jew in the Room No Longer”

Three weeks ago, I wrote an email to my sons Richard and Andrew. My wife Genie and I were traveling in Europe. We had just spent our first day in Berlin after four days in Prague.

I wrote about my most moving experience in Prague, visiting the Jewish area and in particular the Pinchus Synagogue. Painted on its walls are the names of over 77,000 Jews from Moravia and Bohemia who perished in the Holocaust. On display was artwork by the children of Theresienstadt who were later murdered.

I wrote about our visit that day to the new Holocaust memorial in Berlin. I wrote about a preserved site in a Berlin park called track 17 where Jews were sent by train to the death camps.

Then I wrote about visiting the estate in Potsdam where the Final Solution was planned. We finished the day at what is left of the Berlin Wall.

I wrote my kids about all of this.

But I also wrote them this story.

That evening in our hotel lobby, Genie spied a young man with a yemalcha, dressed in black formal-looking clothes running up the stairs to the second floor banquet area. We looked up at the electric bulletin board at its only entry. Judith-Eliyah Chatuna it said, Salons A and B. Genie Googled Chatuna. Chatuna means wedding. There in Berlin, Germany a Jewish wedding.

We followed the young man up the stairs. We peeked into the ball room. People were eating, laughing, and chatting away. It could have been the Westin Galleria where my son Andrew's Bar Mitzvah was held.

We then heard familiar music. Hava Negila? Could it be? In Germany? We peered back in. There were two circles with a barrier between, men dancing on one side, women on the other. It was not just a Jewish wedding. It was an Orthodox Jewish wedding. We almost cried. After days of wading through the past of Jewish death and destruction, a celebration of Jewish life!

For reasons that will always remain a mystery, I decided to share the email to Richard and Andrew with Rabbi Lyon, Cantor Gerber and Rabbi Miller. Surprisingly, back came an email from Rabbi Lyon.

Len, we have had an opening in the annual Yom Kippur Symposium. Could you step in? I asked Rabbi for 24 hours to consider his offer, but it took only 5 minutes to decide. I had always wanted to do this. So what if I was the pinch hitter. After all, so was Dusty Rhodes, the most valuable player of the 1954 World Series.

Judaism has not just shaped my life. Judaism IS my life. But the expression of my Judaism often changed with my situation. In my life I have alternated between being “the only Jew in the room” to being surrounded by my fellow Jews.

I think I first realized everyone wasn't Jewish when I went to public school in 1953 in Stratford, CT. I had to explain Hannukah to the Christian children. My teacher called my mother concerned that my stories were converting some of my fellow students who thought an 8 day holiday with gifts was way better than a one day holiday. They wanted in.

In 1956, we moved to Long Island, properly pronounced Lawng-Oyland. Here, I was no longer the only Jew in the room. But all the rest of them came from places I never heard of like the Bronx or Brooklyn. But they were Jewish and became my lifelong friends.

Later, in high school, my family was to move back to CT. But the plant my father was to manage there burned down. Happily, by the grace of God, I stayed a New Yorker.

I had decided to be a doctor when I was 10, having been inspired and encouraged by two of my parents' physicians, Dr. Albert Fuss and Dr. Irwin Cohen. Yes, they were Jewish, a lot less common among doctors then than now. I also became a doctor because the doctors kept saving my father's life, sending him home from the hospital after his multiple brushes with death from ulcer disease. My Dad, an engineer, could fix anything mechanical or electrical. But doctors could do something even my Dad couldn't do. They could fix broken people. This was a mystical society that I wanted to join.

I also wanted to go to Yale. But I didn't get in. Who knew God was at work once again. He sent me south, to Duke University, in Durham, NC. Once again, I was the only Jew in the room. Some of the men in my freshman dorm had never even seen a Jew before.

That winter I came home with the Duke crest stitched on my blue blazer. The Duke seal is dominated by a large, white cross.

Upon seeing this symbol of Christianity on my jacket my rabbi, the late Nathan Rosenbaum, sat me down for a talk. He explained to me that Christianity is a religion of faith. Judaism is a religion of laws. These belief systems were incompatible. I would have to choose.

As a result, the patch came off the blazer. I returned to Duke, pledged the Jewish fraternity ZBT that had broken the color line among Duke fraternities the year before and found myself among my people again.

At Duke, I also had my first intellectual introduction to Christianity.

A course in Religion was not an elective at Duke in 1966. I had to take Religion 1 and 2. RELG 1 was the so-called Old Testament, the only Testament I knew. RELG 2 was the New Testament and my teacher, a wonderful Presbyterian minister named Dr. Boyd Daniels, had us read every word.

Wow! It's not about carols, or trees or bunnies. It's about forgiveness and faith as the foundation of human interactions. It was very different from Judaism. It was also very different from the world I saw around me. I did not see Christian forgiveness or faith governing the human interactions I witnessed on TV in Washington DC or Vietnam or Israel, nor did I see these values in New York and Durham. Rather, I saw the Jewish philosophy of law as the guiding imperative for a just society.

During the time between high school and Duke medical school, I never dated a Jewish girl. They were pretty scarce in Durham. Then, during my third year of medical school one of my housemates told me about this cute Jewish girl in the freshman class, one of only 15 women in a class of 115 freshmen and one of only 2 Jewish women in the class. He introduced me to her two days later in the medical school library. She was short and cute with freckles, curly dark hair and wire-rimmed glasses that she peered over as they sat on the tip of her nose. She was dressed in a stretchy, tight multicolored woven top and a shortish skirt showing off her great legs. She was busy studying physiology, vigorously underlining her class notes in three colors of marker.

I was there to pick up girls. She just wanted to complete her assignment.

"I have to study", she said, something I would hear again and again.

She relented to go out with me that Saturday evening so I would leave her alone.

We had a terrible time at the concert I took her to, but after the show we went to what passed for a delicatessen in Durham. We had a bite and talked. We went back to my house and talked and laughed. And for those waiting for a steamier ending—we just talked and laughed!

We've been talking and laughing ever since. Ten weeks later, on Christmas Eve, 1971, I proposed to her in the front seat of a rented turquoise blue Ford Pinto in the parking lot of my grandmother's high rise apartment in North Miami Beach. Dr. Kleinerman and I were married the following summer in Cleveland by Rabbi Lillyveld at Fairmont Temple.

In 1975 our careers took us to Washington, DC. I went to the National Cancer Institute, Genie to DC Children's Hospital and later the NCI. We had our first son, Richard, there, somehow managing to find a mohel for a bris. For a variety of career reasons, it was getting time to move on after 9 years in DC. Besides, for us, Washington was not a nurturing Jewish

community. Although we were not the only Jews in this room, we might as well have been. In our 9 years there, we were never invited to a Seder, a Rosh Hashana dinner or a break the fast party. Half the Jewish doctors at NIH worked on Yom Kippur and questioned why I didn't. We never felt at home in Washington.

Still laughing, God sent us to Texas.

Oy, we thought, will there be any Jews in Texas playing among the deer and the antelope?

Genie insisted that we join a synagogue—even before we moved here and we joined Beth Israel. Rabbi Karff and Cantor Gerber were like nothing we had ever heard before. I actually liked going to services again and Genie's Reform Judaism seemed so much less oppressive and more accessible than the old fashioned New York Conservative Judaism that I knew. This was more like it! I was again not the only Jew in the room.

Our second son Andrew is a real Texan. We are jealous of this, but we got here as fast as we could.

Through the years our Judaism and the Beth Israel community have supported and nurtured us. Genie almost died after surgery in 1995. Richard had to battle his own demons, but I can say with great pride that he has triumphed and my role in his battle is what I consider the greatest accomplishment of my life. There is no doubt that I was put on earth to be Richard's father, a very challenging job, indeed, but a most gratifying one.

Genie and I lost our parents, Genie's mom to cancer in 1995 and her Dad in an auto accident in Florida right after we returned from Israel in 1999 where Andrew had just been Bar Mitzvah'd at the Western Wall. My Dad was very ill and died in 2000. My mother hung on with serious dementia for over 10 years, dying last year unable to recognize her family or converse at all.

Andrew had an emergency stay in the St. Luke's ICU a few years ago. Both Rabbi Lyon and Cantor Gerber as well as Dr. Ray Kahn supported us through that. And many of you know I have had my share of physical problems including very unexpected coronary by-pass surgery in 2002 through which Cantor Gerber sat with Genie. I also have had two back operations in the past 2 years and a serious bout of depression a few years ago.

I had a therapist who once said "doctors bring people into this world and doctors help them out of it. They can handle most of what happens in between as well." I truly believe that. If I have a second religion it is medical science. Health reform or not, doctors still do God's work on Earth. As proof, Heenayni, I am here.

I also paid for my belief in our Jewish principles of law over faith at work. As a Vice President, I had overseen the clinical research infrastructure at MD Anderson for years when a problem of significant scope arose in some of the clinical research trials there. This left me trapped between my authority being challenged by faculty members who had violated Federal law on

one side and the executive administration for whom I worked on the other not supporting what they considered my hard line stance of strict interpretation of Federal human research Code. They felt my defense of the law was too dogmatic and inflexible. But I would not put my faith in those who considered themselves above the law now, then or ever, even my fellow doctors. Law matters to me. After all-I am a Jew. I would not bend. The loss of my Vice Presidency was inevitable from then on and in 2007, I was relieved of my position.

Still laughing, God then said, go to Washington and work on health care reform. So I became a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health Policy fellow. Genie stayed in Houston and I spent 2008-2009 on sabbatical in DC working in the US Senate. The politics of health care reform are a challenge like no other I have encountered. I continue to work toward a just system of health care delivery for I believe that some amount of health care is a basic human right.

As much as Hippocrates and Hebrew school, kugel and Koufax, Nathan Lane and Leonard Nimoy, and Myron Cohen and Jackie Mason, have influenced me, Judaism didn't just shape my life. It IS my life.

So, 3 weeks ago, after four days reliving the greatest Jewish catastrophe of all, I wrote my kids and my clergy about a simple Jewish wedding in Berlin, a Chatuna in Germany. And I accepted Rabbi's offer to step in and pinch hit today.

I hope I did half as well as Dusty Rhodes did in 1954.

L'Shana Tova to you all, or should I say, y'all, my fellow Texas Jews in the room.