

My name is Ruth Frank Nathan and I was married to Charles David Nathan for 26 years. Charlie passed away peacefully on Yom Kippur a year ago. They say that people who die on Yom Kippur are “Bal Shuva” meaning a very special person. Charlie was surely that. We came from very different family backgrounds. Charles was the son of very active parents in the Jewish Community – parents who were involved of all phases of Jewish life in Houston. Charly was a true Texan. I came from immigrant parents in New York City. My mother came to America at the age of 15 all alone. She came under an assumed name. Her older sister was to have come to America but changed her mind and decided to get married. There was a ticket and a passport that was not to be wasted. When my mother arrived in Hamburg to board the ship the authorities looked at her picture and said she didn’t look like the picture. She told them she had been sick. Had my mother lived to be 65 she would have collected her Social Security much earlier.

My mother was one of 12 children consisting of 9 sisters and 3 brothers. As money was saved it was used to bring over another single sister. When each of my single aunts arrived they all found a job working in a dress factory owned by someone from their home town of “munkach.” At that time people had large feather quilts which we now call “Duvets.” My aunts would make covers for the duvets. There was always a piece of material left and because I was so small they were able to make me a dress. I remember wishing I could have a dress that didn’t match the quilt covers.

In 1939 there were still 5 married sisters and 3 brothers and their families as well as both sets of grandparents in Europe. One sister and her family came on the last boat out of Germany. Another aunt and her family were able to immigrate to Argentina since the United States did not accept any new immigrants at that time. The additional sisters and brothers and their families perished in the Holocaust. My mother and father had no idea what had happened to their parents or the rest of the family. When the war ended there were some nieces and nephews that survived the concentration camps. My father who had his own business was able to sign affidavits that stated that he would be responsible for them. I went with my mother to meet each boat as different family members arrived. I would stand on the dock and shout “Ich ben Esther tukta.” I am Esther’s daughter.

That was a very difficult time for my family. Each night there would more horror stories as to what happened to those who had not survived. My parents were relieved to learn that their parents had died before the Germans took the Hungarian Jews to the concentration camps. There was already a stream of family and non-family that stayed in our house. I would be sent to a friend’s house to stay if my bed was needed. The stories stayed with me all my life. Today when my 24 first cousins gather we share our different stories. I have cousins who were born in Europe and came to America as children. I have cousins who came from Argentina. My sister and I were of the first generation of cousins to be born in America.

I never knew my grandparents since whatever money that was saved was used to bring over another single sister. I was lucky though, I had a great uncle who had a shoemaker shop down the street from where I lived. I would see him every day and he used to let me play with the nails and other repair items. He never yelled at me no matter what I did. It was my first experience with such unconditional love. He was reluctant to bring over his wife and when she did arrive we knew why, "tanta" stayed with us the first night she arrived. When my sisters and I woke up that day we saw what we thought was a head sitting on a chair knob. We learned that it was a "shitel" or wig that traditional women wear to cover their hair. My job became going to shul on Shabbat with my Tanta and carrying her book. Since I was not yet 13 years old and could still carry on Shabbat. I received a special Chalah that she baked each week in the shape of a bird. The night my uncle died I woke up in the middle of the night and knew he had died. I think when someone is so close to you that you can feel his presence as he goes on to another world.

I grew up going to The Catskills on what we called the Jewish Alps. Each year for 2 weeks we go to "another world." We always stayed in a Kosher hotel and my aunts, uncles and cousins would all join us. The Catskills were also where young Jewish boys and girls would meet their future husbands and wives. The young men would be waiters and the young women would be counselors in the day camp. Jerry Lewis worked at the hotel next door to us as an MC. I'm sorry that my children never experienced these special summers. When I moved away from New York with my family we would always come back for a week in the Catskills to spend time with grandparents and other family members. It was love in big doses.

I always felt that being Jewish was special and wanted to be a part of this rich culture. In my day girls were not Bat Mitzvahed but I did graduate from Hebrew School and Hebrew High School. There was a YM&YMHA in my neighborhood and I my first job was as a junior counselor in the day camp. I continued on over the years as Arts and Crafts counselor, water instructor and finally Day Camp Director. Jewish camping to me is the most wonderful experience you can have that enriches their feelings of a rich Jewish Heritage. I was involved in Jewish Camping for over 30 years. I continued to meet ex counselors and remember that I always had candy on my desk and time to listen to their important stories.

I married and had 2 wonderful children and got a masters degree in Speech Pathology and worked in my children's school system. My Rabbi called one day and said there was a new JCC opening nearby and was looking for a Camp Director. Since my marriage had ended and I needed to have other sources of income, I met with the JCC director and was given \$75,000 to start an instant camp. I found a site with a lake and lots of grounds and we had instant camp using tents as our shelters. We had a contest to name the camp and "Camp Nachas" was born - Nachas can be translated as happiness. I realized that I needed one job rather than 2 full time jobs. I applied to the JCC's of America and my first job back into the field was as the Director of the Plainfield Jewish Community Center. After 2 years a decision was made to consolidate the 2 JCC's in the area and I needed to look for another job.

I got a call from Jerry Wiche who I met over the years at conferences asking me to come to Houston for an interview. I told him I didn't think I wanted to come to Texas but I would come and visit. I came in December and it was 70 degrees and the people were so friendly. My next interview was in Baltimore. When I encountered a snowstorm the decision to come to Houston was an easy one. I told my children I was moving to Texas and my son said "Jewish Mothers don't leave their children." My son was already living on his own and I took the job. My daughter quickly followed and continued her education in Texas. She became a unit head of our teen travel camp and followed in her mother's footsteps.

I guess the word "Besharit" is what happened to me in moving to Texas - which means what is meant to be... I was planning to lead a trip to Israel for the JCC and Charley had told someone he was interested in going to Israel. He called the JCC and spoke to me about coming to the meeting to discuss the trip. He continued on as a true southern gentleman and asked if we could have coffee after the meeting. Sharon Gerber was working at the JCC at the time and I said "this man has such a kind voice - he's someone I could marry." We dated for a few weeks and I suggested that we take a trip to Austin and San Antonio. Charly thought about it for a while, he thought that if we did that then we would have to get married. In San Antonio we visited a jewelry shop and Charly suggested I pick out a present. I picked out a ring and Charly said as it goes - we're engaged. We came back to tell family and friends who all thought we were crazy. Charly may have seemed like this quiet, gentle person but when he was determined he always got his way.

Charly and I took our first trip together after we married, to Israel. I wanted Charley to share my deep feelings about Israel and what it stood for. I decided to become a part of the B'nai Mitzvah class at Beth Israel (which is adult bar and bat mitzvah classes). Charly sat in on the classes with me each week. When we were given our Torah Portions, Charly said he had already been Bar Mitzvahed. Rabbi Karff said he could do it again. Charly and I accepted the Torah for our class. We talked to each other as we stood before the Ark and I said the Bnai Mitzvah was my commitment to life time Jewish learning. Charly said his religious practices had changed over the years but the one thing that was constant in all forms of Judaism was the Torah. We will always have that common thread regardless of our individual practices.

In continuing with this commitment to Jewish learning is that I have been part of the Melton Program at the JCC. I have been studying weekly for over the past 14 years. I have been fortunate to be able to work in a field that allows me to further my commitment to Jewish learning and lifestyle. I was able to raise my children with Friday night Shabbat dinners, lighting candles, baking Challahs and the observance of all Jewish holidays not just Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. I was able to give them these warm, fuzzy feelings that come with sharing memories.

I was able to incorporate these feelings to participants in the many programs I was involved with in the Jewish Community Center for 24 years. I am still a camper at heart and so directing the Jewish Community Center Camp gave me the opportunity to work with children of all ages and the teens that were a part of our staff. I was able to plan travel trips around the

world that would involve outstanding Judaic scholars and I was able to interface with many of our Jewish Seniors and made their lives richer.

We are very fortunate to belong to a synagogue which can offer meaningful experiences, a Jewish Community Center that offers a variety of venues to make for a very rich Jewish Life no matter how young or old and I feel blessed at a life that allowed me to continue to grow and learn. I have also been blessed with beside my children and grandchildren to have wonderful friends and family and now my friend's children who continue to make me smile and cook. The Jewish word for love is "food".

Thank you for letting me share some of my life with you.