

It's Yom Kippur, and I have a confession. I never dreamed that I would be standing here, addressing my congregation on this, the holiest day of the year. Admittedly, I entertained the thought, but only in my mind. I'd be sitting in this beautiful sanctuary, waiting for this service to begin, and reviewing the names of the Symposium speakers. I'd wonder, Who are they? Do I know them? What are their stories?" In those private moments, I would sometimes think, "what if the rabbi asked ME to speak?" Do I even have a story? a narrative that could define my life or religious beliefs? I've had a great life, but do I have a compelling story to share about my faith? I immediately dismissed the idea. After all, I came close to being a religious school dropout!

That's right. During my teen years, like many of my peers at the time, I hated going to religious school. And, I complained incessantly about it to my parents every week. "It's such a waste," I'd tell them. "I don't learn anything." Believe me, I'm sure the synagogue staff would have welcomed my departure. They'd no longer have to deal with my disinterested attitude and disruptive antics. From setting the retreat house on fire to practical jokes played on the teachers and staff, I was a handful.

As the third and youngest child, I easily wore my parents down.

Or, so I thought. Perhaps one of my father's wisest parental strategies came in the edict he put forth: "You want to quit? Fine. But you will have to tell RABBI KARFF yourself."

The following week, Rabbi Karff agreed to meet me. With his calm, direct manner, the Rabbi said: "so I hear you want to quit Sunday school."

I looked into his eyes as though I were looking into the eyes of God. Suddenly, I experienced a dramatic change of heart.

Without a moment's hesitation, I responded, "Not me!" Consequently, I completed my religious school education without further adieu. Not until many years later, when I had my own family, would I recognize the value of this education, would I follow my instinct to leave Emanu El, and return home to Beth Israel.

Like my father and grandfather, I have always relied on instinct and trusted my intuition. Right before World War II, my father left Germany. His parents had a gut feeling that it would be safer in the U.S. despite my great grandparents' argument that things wouldn't get "that" bad. Nevertheless, my grandfather left everything behind - his parents and a thriving family grocery business.

He arrived in Cincinnati to become a sacker in a neighborhood grocery store. His decision took tremendous courage. Could I do that? Undoubtedly, his choice made the difference in my family's survival. Was it beshert that my great grandparents, faithful and observant Jews, would perish in the Holocaust while my grandfather, who followed his instincts, would survive and that his children and grandchildren would thrive? Or was there some higher authority involved?

I have always had questions about the fundamentals of my religion, actually of most religions. Is God directly involved in life's daily trials and tribulations? in my personal and professional life? in what has happened thus far and what's going to happen in the future?

In my youth, I questioned, and I continue to do so. While I'm not proud of my immature behavior in Sunday School, I realize that these rebellious acts were necessary to my spiritual journey and what would eventually emerge as my Jewish identity.

First, I have always accepted that I am Jewish. I never wanted to be anything else. I neither cared about Christmas trees; nor felt left out when the Easter Bunny passed over my house. We had our own Jewish traditions, and I always looked forward to the High Holy days... Hey... it was an excused absence from school!

My family wasn't particularly observant. However, Friday nights were special. With a full course meal, including the lighting of the Shabbat candles, wine and homemade Challah (a recipe brought over from Germany). No one made plans until after the Shabbat dinner. I can still remember my sisters' dates waiting in the living room for us to finish the meal. For my parents, Ada Mae & Walter, having the five of us together at home on Friday nights felt right, felt more religious than going to temple.

The Jewish holidays provide the strongest memories of faith based family gatherings. I always looked forward to being with my cousins and family at these times. I still do. It was a tradition on which I could depend; it was the same every year. The Holidays brought us together. We still carry out these traditions that strengthen our family and bind the generations. Our family will leave services today and break the fast together at our home as we do every year.

I have always chosen to be a member of a reform synagogue. (Why?) Reform Judaism encourages questioning and allows for personal interpretation. Reform Judaism works for me. Admittedly, I have never bought into the puppet master theory of a God pulling the strings. On the other hand, I wholeheartedly embrace the Jewish concepts of free will and beshert.

To me, being Jewish meant certain things, such as joining a Jewish fraternity, developing close relationships with Jewish kids and marrying a Jewish girl. My parents never really talked about this or set rules about it. Perhaps, I assumed that if I were one of the Chosen People, I needed to choose a Jewish life partner.

My 26-year history with Sandi proves that fate has been on my side. I met Sandi in high school and immediately felt the chemistry. She didn't. I childishly acted out to get her attention, threw her furniture in the swimming pool, and called her annoying nicknames. Her mother prayed that I'd go away and someday have children that gave me the same kind of grief. I would tell my friends not to ask Sandi for dates. I feel certain Sandi chose to attend college at Emory in Atlanta so she didn't have to see me at UT in Austin. But fate controlled the cards. Sandi transferred to UT – and by chance moved into my same apartment building.

On the very day she moved in, I just happened to notice a strange man struggling with a huge load of suitcases and boxes. I offered to help. When we arrived at his destination, there they were:

Sandi and her mom, sitting there, drinking iced tea. I was in the door and in her life to stay. For me, our union is a Jewish thing:

it is meant to be: beshert.

And what a life it has been. It's almost shameful how lucky I am. My life is blessed with a great wife (breakfast in bed 5x per week!), kids, family, and good health. Plus, I have Elaine, my mother-in-law who is more like a mother, who gives the best advice and is always on my side. Well, most of the time. She speaks to God for all of us, so I know I am covered.

From my early youth to now, I have been living the dream, always following my heart, my instincts. For example, when I left a good job at the bank to join the family business, my parents were skeptical. After all, they had spent all this money on private education & college & incredible life experiences. And for what, so I could be a car salesman? I know they would have been proud of what I have accomplished, building a successful dealership from the ground up especially in this tough economy.

But, sadly, they would never know.

Every life, no matter how blessed, has its share of dark moments. My dark moment happened on March 15, 1991. It was about 8 pm when my Uncle Jim called and said he wanted to come over. I knew before he told me. I asked, "Was it both of them?"

He said, "yes." I knew that the worst possible thing had happened. Both my mother and father were dead, killed in a tragic airplane crash.

Was it beshert that the accident happened just a few miles from our summer home on Lake McQueeney, our favorite family destination, a place that had been the site of so many wonderful family memories?

What was it like being 26 years old, at the beginning of my adult life, newly married, with an 18 month old and to lose the two people that had always sustained me and shared that life with me? You can imagine: it was shocking, disorienting, frightening, and heartbreaking.

It could have been emotionally crippling for Susan, Lisa, Sandi & me, but for the strength and support of those who surrounded and comforted us: my aunts & uncles, Shirley and Allen, Marlene and Jim, and of course, Sandi's parents, Elaine & Jack, and siblings who opened their hearts to me, treating me as their own son and brother. My cousins surrounded me; friends came from far and near to offer their condolences, counsel, humor, food and books to read about grief. While I appeared outwardly strong (even detached from my emotions some would say with concern), I suffered privately with solemn moments of loss and regret, with recurring nightmares, vivid dreams where I destroyed my dad's plane before the trip could take place. Our family suffered as well. The strong bonds held together by parents were weakened by their absence. When it seemed that things couldn't get worse, Sandi's pregnancy miscarried at 19 weeks. We were unprepared for all of these devastating events. Yet, there was no one to blame. Throughout it all, did I ever raise my fists toward heaven and cast blame or doubt? Never. There are those who thought my behavior strange, uncommon. How could I not feel anger and resentment? But I didn't. Instead, I felt compelled to keep moving, to choose life.

I accepted my parents' untimely death as beshert and decided their "Life after death" would be the memory and lessons that they taught me, memories and lessons that are bound up in the code of ethics of our Torah, in the history of our people over thousands of years, in what we refer to as a Jewish Way of Life. I had amazing parents who had given me the confidence, skills and knowledge to make good choices, as well as the courage to take responsibility. What better tribute to their memory, than to live by these very standards and pass them on to my own children, their grandchildren.

As I am quickly approaching the point in my life where the time without my parents is greater than the time we shared together, I often reflect on some of the things they used to say to me. Namely, that I have but one job in life: and that's to prepare my children for when we are gone: to make sure they are emotionally, spiritually and financially strong and they have the confidence, skills and conviction to face any and all of life's challenges. The Talmud reminds us to always move from sorrow to joy. Thus, after my parents' deaths, I moved slowly and deliberately, each day focusing on the blessings in my life. With my dad gone, Jack, my father-in-law stepped in to mentor me. He made it very clear from day one that he was there for me and has always been there with great fatherly advice. And what a mentor he continues to be: a forward thinking yet conservative businessman, a leader and philanthropist, a great role model.

And, of course, to guide me, inspire me, cater to me, make certain I am properly dressed and fed I have Sandi.

It is Sandi who is the source of our family's spirituality; I have her to thank for putting me in touch with my spiritual side.

She even figured out a way to get me back to Religious School. Forget boating or sleeping late on the weekends, Sandi convinced the rabbi to offer adult bible classes while the kids were in Sunday School. Before long, our group of three developed into a committed group of casual biblical scholars. With a renewed interest in modern Judaism, our group encouraged Rabbi Lyon to plan a trip to Israel for our congregation. The last such adventure had been in 1988; a return was way overdue. This past summer, fifty of us, mostly members and staff from our congregation, journeyed to Israel. People kept telling me I was crazy to go; it was dangerous; it's a long flight; there were bombings, etc. Others, who had made the trip, promised that it would be life changing!

From the moment I landed, I kept waiting for that special feeling. But, honestly, my "aha" moment just never happened. Of course, everything we encountered was fascinating: from visiting ancient holy cities to walking the metropolitan streets. Each day, our group grew closer, laughing and talking, as we sampled Israeli wines, drank water from the Jordan River, picked and ate fruit from the fields, walked, rode, hiked, climbed, and bicycled through the Promised Land. With each adventure, each special event, I kept anticipating an epiphany. Nothing!

At first, I shared my feelings about this with fellow travelers; some had already experienced such a moment, like Sandi who experienced "her magic moment" at the tense Syrian border. Like myself, others were still waiting.

It is written that God created the earth in six days, and on the 7th, he rested. It would be that seventh day that I saw the light at the end of the tunnel, literally. On Shabbat, we traveled from Tiberius, driving through the Mt. Scopus tunnel into Jerusalem. Overlooking the city, I finally experienced what others had promised. I felt proud, and yes, emotional. I felt an unexplainable sense of belonging and a feeling of being forever Jewish and forever faithful to the existence of Israel. On Shabbat Eve, as we faced the Western Wall, the plaza suddenly filled with several hundred Israeli soldiers, dressed in fatigues and carrying arms. The soldiers begin wildly dancing and singing. Their energy spread through the crowd, creating a heightened feeling of energy that lifted our spirits and left us all teary eyed with joyful pride. It was indeed the best moment of the trip for me.

Early the next morning, we hiked up Masada. Rabbi Miller took a Torah borrowed from the Hebrew Union College and carried it to the ancient temple high atop the mountain for a Saturday Shabbat Service.

We stood on the very place where thousands of years before, Jews took their own lives rather than give in to the Romans. Randomly, people begin to appear from everywhere; some came and kissed the Torah. It mattered not that we had never met, yet we had a common

bond, we shared a common history and culture. I realized that no matter how far away we are, our lives are tied together.

This feeling of belonging was not really new for me: it had guided me in college to find a place to attend high holy day services, when at home I had to be prodded to attend. This feeling provides an ethical compass for me, sustains me in times of terrible loss, and reminds me of the many blessings of my life. You see, this feeling of belonging runs strong in the Wolf family, where my children, proudly wear their Jewishness on their sleeves. While I don't tell them every day, I hope they know just how much I love and respect them for their unique talents and personalities and for how they boldly claim their Jewish heritage.

Were you to ask me today to describe my most spiritual moments, I would tell you that they are when I am surrounded by my family (Sandi, Cameron, Ashley, Samantha, Snapple & Coco), when we are adrift on the boat, detached from business, school and social distractions, enjoying those rare moments of relaxation and renewal.

I am so grateful for these times with my family; I consider these to be the Sabbaths in my life.

When I read my name in the program this year, I realized once again: it was beshert that I am standing here today in the same building where I was bar mitzvahed and confirmed, where I attended the Bar and Bat Mitzvahs of my children and the funeral of my parents.

Ironically, the kid who hated Sunday school is back; back to share the lessons he has learned from first accepting his Jewishness and then embracing it, with faith, appreciation and a commitment that our children, our neighbors and the world know that we will stand together; both in our faith and in the security of the State of Israel.

L'shonah Tovah.