

I grew up in a Jewish neighborhood on the near northside of Chicago. In retrospect our neighborhood was not predominately Jewish. There was a total blend of society with a mix of socio-economic families from the wealthy to the homeless. But, everyone was Jewish; from Johnny Moy and his Chinese laundry that produced a folded shirt that, once unfolded, had no wrinkles or creases (like magic) and Luigi, who had a newstand on the corner near the drug store and also collected bets for the neighborhood bookies. They all ate corned beef on rye or Chicago dogs and drank Dr. Brown's soda.

Several times as a young teenager, I would be walking through the neighborhood and someone would come out of a building and say, "Boychik, are you bar mitzvah?" I would answer yes and then be asked to come in for a minyan. Times were different then and you would never think that it may not be safe. I remember entering not knowing anyone, but feeling comfortable, very proud and very Jewish.

My parents were immigrants who came over on steamships; my father from Poland and my mother from Russia. The typical story unfolded: my parents met, married, started a family and opened a laundry, cleaning and tailoring shop. They were living the American dream.

I attended Sunday School, Hebrew School, Bar Mitzvah and Confirmation. My parents mostly spoke Yiddish at home, especially if they did not want my sister and me to know what they were talking about. The Forward, a Jewish newspaper was always in our home. My parents were devoted to each other, and everything they did was for their children. We had a loving family, being Jewish, and a foundation of values derived from our heritage and culture. Material things and money could not replace what we were given.

As a young boy, I remember traveling on buses and the elevated train to the Old West Side for a High Holy Day service. We did not own a car and I still clearly recall holding my father's hand and asking, "Why do we have to be Jewish?" My father looked at me and very calmly and reassuringly said, "Raymond, you were born Jewish and you will die Jewish." We arrived at services where the large windows were pushed open, reflecting a yellow glow from the lights through the stained glass. We heard the beautiful melodic sounds as we surrounded the temple, packed with people inside, along with hundreds of us standing outside. I still remember how beautiful it was and I was very happy to be there and to be Jewish. I never again questioned being Jewish.

As I reflect back over my life, I can honestly say that God has been with me, truly with me, and that I have not only prayed regularly, but have always felt close to God and that I have received his blessings.

I was born with a pyloric obstruction. I was unable to digest anything. When only a few weeks old, the doctors prepared my parents for the possibility that I may not survive the surgery

they were recommending. I survived the surgery only to have the stitches in my infant skin break open. This was a critical time in my very young life. I survived the second set of sutures and I have an eight-inch shoe lace scar to remind me. God was with me and I was only a few weeks old.

When I was about four or five years old, my mother, sister and I were in a cab going to visit family. Mother was attending to my sister, when I pulled the handle back and fell out of the moving cab, in traffic on the Ogden Avenue bridge. Two delivery men from Marshall Field stopped, picked me up and helped my mother. With God's help and blessing I was released from the hospital a few hours later with only some bumps and bruises.

As a young boy, I would play a baseball game called stealing bases. It was played in the middle of the street. We played from sewer cover to sewer cover. I loved that game. As some friends and I were preparing to play, I was so excited that I ran into the street to claim my sewer cover. I then heard a loud screeching of tires and a horn blaring as I turned to see a car stopping only inches from where I stood. Again, God's intervention prevented a serious tragic accident from occurring.

As a sometime undisciplined teenager I recall one instance when I was riding in a car with a group of friends when I should have been at a High Holy Day service. It bothered me and I thought of my Jewish involvement and my parents. I finally asked the driver to stop. I walked about two blocks to a synagogue. I was not properly dressed so I entered as inconspicuously as possible and remained in the back and finally found a seat near a corner. I was very happy that I was there. I felt good. Did my conscience catch up to me or did God touch me one more time? The rabbi was Rabbi Birnbaum, who was a brother to George Burns, the comedian. I thought that was really cool. I know some of you remember Burns and Allen.

When I was struggling financially as a student at the U of H, I went into the old Meyer Brothers Department Store and a salesman I was talking with stopped a lady walking by and told her, "I want you to meet a nice Jewish boy." She said hello and followed that by inviting me to her home for Friday night dinner. She said, "Here is my address. Don't be late." When Selma Levy made a request, you responded. I had dinner with her and her family and moved in two days later. I even drove her Cadillac to classes a couple days a week. Selma was a long time member of this congregation and many of you may remember her. She was a caring and generous individual. Had I been ten seconds later, this experience and help might never have occurred. I am convinced that God was once again intrinsically involved in directing these timely circumstances in my life.

I have a tremendous fear of heights. Years ago I did a wilderness experience that included a mountain climb, rock face climb and a rappel off a cliff. I prayed to God and trusted God that I could complete these activities. When the guide backed me up to the edge of the cliff and I looked over my shoulder, I saw a huge valley below. I then looked at my friend holding the rope and heard the guide tell me to lean back and test the rope. I felt secure knowing that God was with me as I recited the shema, leaned back and rappelled off the cliff. God and I had

a wonderful rappelling experience. Faith in God allowed me to overcome what seemed impossible.

I was married at twenty-three and divorced at twenty-eight. The divorce was amicable; there were no children and few finances to divide. This however was a very traumatic and difficult time for me. No one in my family had ever gotten divorced and I was greatly troubled by that experience. I prayed and prayed, asking God if I would ever remarry and have a family? With the support of close friends and my optimistic trust in God I found solace and peace. I met Esther and God answered my prayers beyond all expectations. This October we will celebrate our 34th wedding anniversary.

After the first few years of our marriage Esther came to me and told me she planned to convert to Judaism. We had never spoken about it and to have that occur has not only been a blessing to our marriage but also to our family. After five years of marriage, Esther and I decided to adopt a baby. We went through the process which was interesting, but often stressful and arduous. Six months after completing the application process Joshua came home with us. We were happy, excited and very thankful to God for this marvelous blessing. Eighteen months later we received a call from the adoption agency requesting that we come in to visit the next morning. We worried and prayed, and we were up all night. The agency informed us that we met the profile for a particular case involving a new born baby and God blessed us with our second child. Our older son, Josh is married and works on Capitol Hill in D.C. Our younger son, Jacob proudly serves in the U.S. Army. While he was deployed to Afghanistan, I drew comfort from the knowledge that God heard my prayers. It was a stressful time but God has blessed us with his safe return.

When Jacob was born he had a heart problem, a pulmonary stenosis. One of his heart valves was too small and doctors informed us that he might need a medical intervention during his growth spurt years. We worried and prayed. After his yearly check-up when he was about thirteen years old the cardiologist told us that he no longer needed to see Jake. We were shocked. The valve in question had corrected itself and there would be no need for any medical intervention. I am thankful for God's blessing of healing.

Parenting is a very difficult job and a tremendous responsibility. Dealing with the complexities of social environments that are foreign to my past experiences was a tremendous challenge. There were many sleepless nights with high levels of anxiety, and very often fears. I drew strength and security from prayer based on the foundation and faith of my past.

Over a forty-year career in the school district I relied on my Judaism in carrying out many of my responsibilities. Decisions affecting children and families were always a priority. As long as my decision did not violate board policy or state law, I was always comfortable that I had made a decision "because it was the right thing to do."

Our trip to Israel last year led by Rabbi Lyon and Rabbi Miller was a fantastic experience. There were many outstanding highlights that acknowledged and reaffirmed my belief and

feelings toward Judaism and God. Arriving at Mount Scopus to look out over the city of Jerusalem was a very powerful moment. I knew that it would be a beautiful view, but it was more than that. I thought about the thousands of years of difficulty, oppression and threats of extinction, yet Jerusalem, Israel and the Jewish people have survived. It was indeed an emotional moment for me. Visiting the Western Wall is the most meaningful experience of the many that I had. Being able to pray at the wall, to embrace the wall and say my prayers was an absolutely stellar moment.

I have now lived many more years than I have left to live. I look back over the years and know that without God, Judaism, family and friendships, my life would have taken a different course. I truly love God and appreciate His blessings. As I move toward my 70th birthday I do it with the knowledge that God has been, and remains, an integral part of my life. If there are any regrets it would only be that I never literally thanked my parents for the foundation they laid for me, although I believe they knew it.

Thank you and good yontev.