

“My Jewish Experience”

I was astonished when Rabbi Lyon invited me to speak today. I haven't been at Beth Israel very long, and I'm not particularly active. I feel honored to be here.

I grew up Jewish in Houston, but have often felt that while I am too Jewish for most of the world, I am not Jewish enough for the rest.

Let me explain: My parents, Joe and Cece Burgower, belonged to Emanu El. Like most congregants, they sent my siblings and me to religious school and attended services for the High Holy Days, bar mitzvahs and yatzheits. They gave to Jewish charities and hosted huge family Seders.

At religious school, I didn't quite fit. A natural blond with hazel eyes, I didn't look like the Jewish children around me back in the 1950s. Some were pretty mean.

My family lived in Maplewood South. It was close to the JCC, but it wasn't Meyerland, and I ended up at Westbury rather than Bellaire. Though my cousin, Jan, was and still is my very best friend, most of my friends were not Jewish. So after I was confirmed, my mom insisted I join a Jewish youth group.

My parents came of age in a time when Jews did not date outside the faith. They preferred that I date Jewish boys, but never insisted on it. Dad used to joke that if I married by 25, he wanted me to marry a Jewish boy. If I wasn't married by the time I was 30, he just hoped I got married.

My first boyfriend was Jewish, and the Jewish boys who were my friends at the University of Missouri are still my friends on Facebook. But when I transferred to the University of Iowa, I didn't meet many Jews. I remember one boy who sat near me in the dining hall who went on and on about how he hated Jews. When I asked if he knew any, he admitted he did not. I asked if he had ever eaten with a Jew. He said he would not—he would be able to SMELL them.

When I returned to Houston after graduation, I was again subjected to anti-Semitic remarks—this time at the high school where I taught English. The first year I was there, the staff had a Christmas party. One teacher told me I couldn't come because I was Jewish. Another asked what would happen if he got a blood transfusion from a Jew. (I told him his nose might grow but he would get smarter.) One student, an African American, asked me if all Jews were rich. I asked him if all blacks were lazy. He came halfway out of his chair before he realized the answer to both questions was the same: Of course not.

I left teaching and went on to work as a journalist. While covering the far right for Newsweek in the 1980s, I got quite an earful about my people being the “spawn of Satan.” But what can you expect from the KKK? Still, when they lit up a cross and held a “weapons blessing ceremony” for my photographer, I felt afraid for the first and only time in my career.

Around this time major changes were happening within the Reform Jewish Movement. The Union Prayer Book, with its rich English translations, disappeared. We were embracing more Hebrew. Yarmulkes became Kipot; Taluses became Talit. You saw both in Reform congregations. Emanu El and Beth Israel hired CANTORS.

To better understand this newer Reform Judaism, Jan and I attended basic Judaism classes. We even tried to learn Hebrew.

In 1982, I married a man who had been raised with no religion. My rabbi refused to marry us unless he converted, and I did not think that was something one should do just to get married. We found another rabbi, a sex therapist, to perform the service. Unfortunately, the marriage didn't survive.

Ten years later, I married again. Jim, my current husband, couldn't be more different from me. He is from a small town rather than a city. He is as far to the right politically as I am to the left. And he is Catholic.

But he makes me laugh, and we both wanted kids. At almost 40, my time was running short. Still, I could only marry Jim if our children would be educated in Judaism. I wanted them to know what being Jewish meant so that if, God forbid, they were made to suffer because their mom was Jewish, they would never feel ashamed.

Jim suggested we raise the kids as both.

Now you may frown on this. Many Jews do. But I was certain God wouldn't mind. I still am.

Jim wanted a religious ceremony. A priest was out of the question, so I looked for a rabbi to marry us. At that time, only one congregation allowed their rabbi to marry interfaith couples, the Houston Congregation for Reform Judaism. I was drafted to teach religious school there before my son was even born, and continued doing so at Beth El after we moved to Missouri City.

Did I hate taking my kids to catechism? YES! I hated it so much that for the entire first year I went with my son to class to make sure he wasn't being taught I would go to hell.

In addition to teaching religious school, I took my son and daughter to every Sukkot picnic and every Purim Spiel and every Simchat Torah march. When the kids began studying Hebrew in 4th grade, Rabbi Schulman said they would have to make a choice. Both James and

Sarah chose Judaism. Still, before the rabbi would give us a bar mitzvah date, he wanted my husband to assure him my son wasn't going to church.

James loved his bar mitzvah. He attended religious school for one more year.

Sarah, on the other hand, wanted to continue her Jewish studies. We changed temples, though, so she could go to religious school on Sundays rather than Wednesdays when she had softball practice. Only Beth Israel offered this.

Beth Israel is also the temple my brother, Joel, belonged to. After he was murdered in 2003, the Beth Israel community was wonderful to my family. My sister-in-law, like my husband, is Catholic, but honored my brother's wishes and reared her children as Jews. The rabbis welcomed them all, and the children were given free temple memberships. So impressed was my sister, Wendy, that she joined the congregation.

We love this congregation. The religious school is great, and Sarah and I often attend services. The familiar prayers comfort me, and we both love to sing. Cantor Mutlu is amazing. All the rabbis are exquisitely knowledgeable and the kind of teachers I love--The kind that don't mind if you disagree with them.

At school, the children have not escaped anti-Semitism. They have been teased and sometimes bullied because of their faith. Recently, parent softball coaches from another high school insisted that Sarah's team kneel in prayer after a game. When Sarah refused to participate, she was told she was rude.

Surely, it is easier in this world not to be Jewish. So why is Judaism so important to me?

Perhaps it's because so much of our religion centers on teaching it diligently to our children. And while Reform Jews don't have to keep kosher or wear Kipot or even believe in God, we cannot deny who we are. That is the meaning of the story of Esther. That is the take-away message of the Holocaust. Hitler, after all, traced our bloodline, not our faith.

The intellectual part of me knows that any faith can produce the kind of people I'd like my children to be. Emotionally, though, I know that while other faiths concentrate on what you believe, ours focuses on what you do, on tzedakah, on tikkun olam. Our God wants us to care about this world, and to share our blessings with those who have less, to take joy in what is good and beautiful while striving to correct that which is not.

As one member of the Beth Israel book club pointed out, there must be a reason Judaism continues to exist as a faith. So many try so hard to make us kneel, and yet, as Jews, we continue to stand upright.

The intellectual part of me does not see God as a person who listens and judges, but the emotional part of me talks to Her every day. Today, I pray to be a better person – a better

wife, parent, sister and friend. I want to be better so that when people around me think about what Jews are like, they will think of someone whom it is NOT so bad to be.

Thank you all for welcoming my family. With you, I have a spiritual home at last. May you all enjoy a good new year.