

How has Judaism shaped my life? This is a question that can only be answered by looking back, within and without at all that I am and do on a daily basis. I know each morning as I wake up, even if I do not think about it, that as I go forth into the world I bear the blessing, burden and obligation of my heritage. I am a Jew, proud, fearful, included and excluded from the world around me.

One of my earliest memories about my Jewish identity is from preschool. When I was three years old I went to a very small, eclectic preschool where there were children of all walks of life and the more interesting your cultural background, the more accepted you were by the head of school. One Spring we were talking about the Passover holiday and it occurred to the teacher to ask if anyone in the class was Jewish. I started to raise my hand but I was just too unsure so I kept it in my lap. That night, while cleaning up from the first night of Seder, I innocently asked my mother, "Am I Jewish?" She chuckled and told me that I was. I then asked, "If I am Jewish, why didn't my hand go up today at school when they asked if anyone in the class was Jewish?" This became our running joke. We would have drills where I would practice raising my hand when asked if I was Jewish. I always got it right after that! In addition, my mother and her girl friends would always tell me that I had to marry a "nice Jewish boy." At the time, I did not understand the importance or implications of this request, but life would teach me.

As a young child, I was one of the few who begged to begin religious school and actually enjoyed going. I think this must have had something to do with knowing I was Jewish and that my best friend who lived across the street was Jewish, too. I vividly remember how proud I was to get dressed every Sunday and go to religious school. I also remember how exciting it was to learn about all the stories and traditions. I think one of my favorite things about being a kid at Beth Israel was the children's services at High Holidays. At the end of every service Rabbi Karff would have all the children come and sit on the steps of the bema to hear his sermon. It was like listening to a direct line from G-d while being important enough to sit on the bema at the messenger's feet!!!! I also somehow always knew I wanted to have a Bat Mitzvah. This may have been from my mother sharing with me that in 1845 my great, great, great, grandfather helped to found the congregation that was to become Beth Israel. I made the sixth generation of my family being Jews in the Houston community. When I was nearly 8 years old, my mother got remarried, thereby gracing me with a brother my same age and grade in school. This solidified the idea of my Bat Mitzvah but also gave us a reason to stay in town and have the ceremony here, at Beth Israel, with Rabbi Karff officiating. I knew the moment that my Bat Mitzvah was complete that I was now an adult member of my community with all its responsibilities and expectations, and I was only 12 years old!

Once I began to fast on Yom Kippur I felt that my commitment to my culture was mine to own. I continued to attend religious school and not only participated in confirmation but also graduated from the religious school's high school. Along the way, my grandfather, who had

been a father figure to me my whole life, needed heart bypass surgery. This was a very scary concept to me, one that made me think of the possibility of having to face my life without him in it. As he left to go into surgery I did the only thing I could think of to do - I said the Shema, the watch word of our faith, over and over like a mantra. Each time I said the prayer, my heart and head felt a little better. I felt that G-d was with me and that the community of Israel was there to watch over me and my grandfather and family in this desperate time. As I prayed, I wanted to believe that G-d could personally help my grandfather come through that surgery, despite all the grander and more pressing things going on the world all the time to which G-d must tend. Despite that realization, I did feel that G-d was with us every step of the way. Looking back on that time I realize that just like so many generations of Jews before me, I knew that if I could just find the strength to say the Shema I would find G-d there to support me. When I look back at that time, I think of how my people, OUR people, said the Shema in the concentration camps and found strength from it. It is amazing how one small prayer, centuries old, could and still does, have such power - to move us, to strengthen us, to give us hope.

When I reached middle school I was fortunate enough to go to a middle school that had a sizeable Jewish population. This was the first school based experience that I had where being Jewish was actually beneficial. The "in" group was pretty much all Jewish kids and the non-Jewish kids who aspired to hang out with them. The speech and debate class and club were filled to the brim with all the Jewish kids, so much so that it was almost like a pre-BBYO. We all had class together and we all attended speech and debate tournaments together nearly every weekend. That was where our bonds were formed, friends made and crushes blossomed. This was my true introduction into the Houston Jewish community. The way it can make you feel a part of something much larger than yourself or make you feel like you are looking in through a window.

As I moved into High School I knew that I wanted to be at Bellaire, where all the Jewish kids went. Even then I knew that I wanted to be with MY people. Even though I was by no means in the "in" crowd, I still wanted to be where the Jewish kids were.

College approached and I was to attend the University of Houston. This was not my idea of a place to have a Jewish identity. I signed up for sorority rush and asked if there was any way that I could start a chapter of a Jewish sorority at U of H. I was met with the coldest response one could imagine by the sorority board at the university. This amazing community within a community that was part of who I was and who I was becoming was not welcome in the social life at my university. Not to worry. I joined Hillel and found my place. During graduate school, the morning of my first set of finals, as I backed out of the driveway of my house, there was a large black swastika spray painted on the side of the house. I was shaken. Living in the South, I had people tell me that I would surely go to hell if did not accept Jesus as my personal lord and savior but I had never had such a vivid personal attack made against me or my family. It felt immediate and graphic. This is the burden that I carry; we all carry, every day. The resolution to this situation was a police report, increased drive bys and a TV interview. The paint was covered and the swastika gone from the house but the image it left in my mind and

on my heart can never be removed. It is the mark of ancient slavery, or the yellow star and it binds us together and makes us stronger. It also made me more sure of who I was and that no matter that I was a Texan and an American, I was, at heart, a Jew.

An important turning point in my Jewish life was how I met my husband. When I finally ended the long term relation I had through college, my parents encouraged me to join the JCC Matchmaker Dating service. This was the J-Date of the day. This was when it was run by a real person, Phyllis, who knew each and every one of her members. When he sent me the date request I went in to see his profile. I was in law school and he sold cars. My first response was, "NO WAY." I approached Phyllis and expressed my concerns, bringing up the stereo-typical, Hollywood car salesman persona. Phyllis told me to go on ONE date with him, that I would see, he was one of the nicest guys in the dating service. As I said, she knew each and every one of her members. She was right and 11 months after we met in the modern version of the most traditional, Jewish way, we were engaged. Three children and 18 years later, the matchmaker knew what she was doing.

All three of our children have found their home in Jewish day school. It is where their roads in the community began. I have always loved having them here at the The Shlenker School. When they were small I always felt that I was dropping them off with extended family. The world is complex and uncertain. Bringing them to my "home" gave me a sense of peace and security. It was my safety net as well as theirs.

When my father died a little over three years ago my family was dealt a blow that was expected but that we were not prepared for. He had been ill for some time and his passing was sort of a blessing in that it ended his suffering. I was flattered by how many people from the community came to the minions. I did not even realize I was on some of these people's radar and yet there they were, supporting me and my family in our time of loss. I am sure that this holds true for many other families in our community as well. I was so proud to be part of the Jewish community when we all came together after the Berry family tragedy. In that situation our entire Houston Jewish community came together to support this family, but that was not all. We Jews managed to reach across the country and across the ocean to find support. My oldest child has had two classmates lose parents this past year. When this happened I explained to her that the children now belong not only to their surviving parent but to the community at large. They are our responsibility, our joy to support.

KOL YISRAEL AREVIN ZEH LA-ZEH: ALL ISRAEL IS RESPONSIBLE ONE FOR THE OTHER. This is what being Jewish means to me. It means being there for each other, when there is food to eat or food that needs to be brought. It is celebrating together and grieving together. It is knowing that you can go to services on any Friday night and find the healing power of prayer and the support of a community. It means traveling to pretty much any location on earth and finding a community that will share your values and beliefs. It has guided me to light Shabbat candles nearly every Friday night, something I did not grow up doing, which in turn connects me to this greater community. Judaism focuses the way I teach my children to react to the world, teaching them to "never remain indifferent". I want them to know it is our job as

Jews to help others, both in our community and outside of it, wherever there is need. It is our job to heal the world and make it a better place, even in the smallest of ways. Within these walls, my "home," I have my family, both G-d given and chosen, the chosen being those that have come to be my family through my commitment to the Jewish community. They all hold a place in my heart. I believe that this relationship is there for ALL of us to reach out and grasp. The community is there for our taking. It is our job to return the favor and seek to support one another.

Turn to someone you don't know and introduce yourself. You may find a part of you that you didn't realize you were missing. A year of peace to you all, L'shana Tova.