

Hello, my name is Ellen Robinson. I'd like to start out by saying I was very honored and humbled when Rabbi Lyon asked me to be a Symposium speaker. Several years ago my Mom talked me into coming to this part of the Yom Kippur service and I have been hooked ever since. I find it fascinating to hear about the life experiences of people I have seen around the temple, and to hear how Judaism has shaped or guided them throughout their lives.

When I started to think about what I would say today, I had to stop and think about the Topic, "What Does Judaism Mean to Me?" How has Judaism shaped my life? My immediate thought was, I love the fact that our religion allows you to make mistakes, learn from them and then, move on. Hey, we even have a holiday that makes this easier to do!

Contrary to popular belief, I don't feel Judaism promotes guilt. We are not taught that we are all sinners and that we should spend the rest of our days on earth making up for the sins we were born with.

We are not taught to live our life so that the after-life will be better. We are taught, to live for today. Make your time on earth meaningful. This is one of the most important concepts I believe in, and embrace about our religion. I feel Judaism teaches us to be grateful for what G-d has given us. This is not to say I haven't had some challenges, but I like to focus on the positive times.

The core of my existence is my positive attitude that I choose to live by. I use the word choose, because that is exactly how I feel you should live your life, you have to choose to live in a positive way. I once read, "Life is 10% of what happens to you, but 90% of how you react." I have definitely had some "stuff" happen to me in my lifetime, but I choose to handle it, learn from it, and move on.

I feel my life truly began, not actually on my Birth-Day, but on the day I was adopted by my parents, Shirley and David Toomim. I know little about my Birth Mother. I know she was from California and that she was a singer, but that is about it.

I know nothing about the circumstances that led her to the decision to give me up, but what I do know is that I will be forever grateful that she made a conscience effort to put me in the care of the Jewish Family Service in Houston; the agency that would eventually handle my adoption. I recognize that my life would have been very different if she had not made the decision to bring me to Houston. I would have never met my soul-mate, Steve Robinson, and so, that in turn would mean, I would have never had my awesome children, Erica and Adam.

I do not have a dramatic, made for TV-Lifetime Movie about when I found out I was adopted. Looking back on it now, I feel like I just always knew. My parents told me that when I was young, they would read me a story called, The Chosen One, and that one day they told me, I

too was a chosen one. I have never had any desire to go find my Birth Mother, because I could not have asked for a better family than the one that adopted me.

I have always been very grateful to my Birth Mother for caring enough about me, to make the conscience effort to hand me over to a Jewish agency. This decision made it possible to remain in this religion, that I love so much. Sometimes on my birthday, I can't help to think if she is thinking about me, or even wondering how my life turned out. But, once I had children of my own, and felt the immense love that comes along with being a parent, I knew for certain, I was not forgotten.

So now you know I am a native Houstonian, in fact I am proud to say, I am a native Beth Israelite. I attended Sunday School (as we used to call it), I was confirmed here, I was married here, and eventually both my children celebrated their Bar & Bat Mitzvahs here. Beth Israel is a very special place to me, It is a place that my family has experienced great joy and a place that we sometimes come to, to deal with life's heartaches.

I always feel a sense of calm and peacefulness when I enter this building. I have had some great Rabbis that have touched my life. First being Rabbi Schachtel and then Rabbi Karff. I feel very close to Rabbi Lyon, and I am so happy he is part of my Spiritual Life. Plus, he gives great hugs!! I do have to admit, I don't make many of the Friday night services, but when I do, I always vow to make it more of a habit of coming. I love being surrounded by "My People." It gives me such a feeling of belonging.

I defiantly needed this sense of belonging when I experienced one of the most impactful episodes of my life. After one of my routine mammograms I was told they had found a tumor and it would have to be taken out and biopsied. Over the years I have had several benign cysts taken out, but somehow, I knew this time it was different. Since I am adopted, I have always been very motivated to have my yearly mammograms on time. I did not know my family history, so I knew I would need to be pro-active about my health.

I was told before my surgery that they would be removing the tumor, checking to see if it was cancerous, and examining the lymph nodes in the area. They would then decide what our next step would be. If the cancer was contained, they would close me up, and I would undergo months of radiation. However, if they found any lymph node that was affected, they would be inserting a port into my chest, so that chemo could be administered. It would mean that I would then be required to start 6 months of chemotherapy, followed by 6 months of radiation: a full year of treatment.

On the day of my surgery, as I was waiting in the pre-op area, I knew that when I woke up, the first thing I would do was lift up the hospital sheet and check to see if I saw a raised area protruding from my chest, where the port was to be inserted. But me, being the consummate Positive Thinker, I remember telling my surgeon, "Not to Worry, they will check the tumor, find it to be self contained and we will then deal with it, with only the radiation treatments."

I had decided it would all turn out for the best. Either way I knew I had a tough fight in front of me.

This is how I have taught myself to think...Think Positive First. I can always adjust and handle what I need to, if it doesn't go as I had planned. Hey, my feeling is, No need to waste a worry!

My Father used to say, "What can't be helped, must be endured"

My family still uses this quote today. We say it, to remind us, sometimes we can't change what's happening, but we can change our attitude. This is one of my favorite quotes from my Father, and believe me, he had many.

My Husband and I refer to these as "Tommimisms."

If you knew my Dad, David Toomim, I'm sure you have your own memories of some great lines he used.

Ok, well, I'm sure you know where this is heading... So I wake up from the surgery, immediately check in the area where they were going to insert the port and to my astonishment, I could see the raised area on my chest where the port HAD been inserted.

I was devastated and quite frankly shocked. Hey! This is ME, bad things don't happen to ME!! So, after I spent a couple of days being very depressed, not answering my friends' persistent phone calls, I decided ok... "What can't be helped must be endured", so here we go. I had decided that this cancer was not going to kill me. I knew I was going to get through this.

My surgery was on July 8, 2009, and I celebrate this day each year, to signify the day I became cancer free. I was fortunate to have a highly skilled surgeon and to be treated at the World renowned MD Anderson. Once I recuperated from the surgery, I started my chemotherapy. My family and husband, Steve, was always there for me, I had a lot of girlfriends ask if they could take me to the Chemo treatments, which I greatly appreciated, but quite honestly I couldn't imagine having anyone there, other than my Stevie. He was my support, my advocate, and defiantly my comic relief.

My children would often tell me I looked good with no hair!... Yeah Right!

So, I would have my treatments on Friday and be back to work on Monday. Magic pills from my Doctor helped that happen, but I sincerely believe my attitude made this horrible experience, a little easier to handle. My thought was to get through each one, one at a time, and then put it behind me.

When I was about to start my chemo treatments, I had two bowls. One was empty, and the other bowl had one marble for each chemo treatment that I was about to endure. When I

would get home from a treatment at the hospital, I couldn't wait to move a marble from one bowl into the other one, signifying the completion of another treatment. Eventually and FINALLY, "my completion" bowl outnumbered my "to do" bowl.

I still have this bowl of marbles and when I see it, I am momentarily reminded of the struggle I went through.

I say momentarily, because this is the way I have chosen to handle it. I have decided being a Cancer Survivor doesn't define me. It has strengthened me, but it is not all that I am.

When I look back on it, it still seems a bit surreal. Until today, not many people outside my family and close friends even know that I have had cancer. This is the thing as a survivor, only you should decide how best to move on. Only you can figure out what is the best way for you to continue on with your life and start living it again. I defiantly had some rough days throughout the treatments, and I told myself I would NEVER look back on this and say, "Oh, it wasn't that bad" you know how some of us Mother's do, when we think about childbirth.

This is where I see the tie-in to my Jewish beliefs. When you think of what the Jews, throughout history, have endured, and in spite of the hardships, our people have still managed to become an important part of the world that we live in.

To me, this illustrates the positive attitude that you have to maintain to move you through, and beyond difficult situations.

Attitude is about convincing yourself you will accomplish what you have set out to do. Attitude is about deciding, this is not going to extinguish my positive outlook. It's all about... saying to yourself, OK, this happened, now what do I need to do to move past it.

When something negative happens, I like say to myself "Can I do something about it?" And if I can't, then I tell myself, "Get Over It!" I find it does nothing for me to continue in a negative state of mind. If I can do something about it, then great, do it, then, GET OVER IT! Try this the next time you are stuck in a traffic jam, which will probably be when you leave the temple this evening. Hey, It's all about your attitude.

Another way Judaism has significantly shaped my life is through Tikkuun Olam, Repair the World. My parents have always stressed to me the importance of giving back. My Father led by example of "Paying it forward." There were many times I saw him help someone out and he never expected or even wanted to be paid back.

He taught me it is our responsibility to give back, but, more specifically, to give back to our Jewish Community.

Both of my parents, and my Uncle Melvyn and Aunt Cyvia have modeled this throughout my life. What I have learned from them is that it is equally important to give your time and to get

personally involved. In Judaism there is a centuries old concept which is described in the Talmud, defining acts of goodwill toward others and it ranks these good deeds higher than mere contributions of money, since they require the actual involvement of the giver. This is something that we can all do.

Regardless of where you are financially, you can always show up and volunteer. I feel such a sense of purpose and happiness when I do this. This is something my husband and I have tried to instill in our children. You don't just write a check. I promise you, you will gain much more by personally getting involved.

Today, when so many people feel disempowered, as though nothing they can do will make a difference, Tikkun Olam reminds us, that even the smallest mitzvah, or act of loving kindness, contributes to the healing of the world.

There are many non Jewish charities that I contribute to, but nothing touches me more deeply than giving back to our Jewish Community. As it turns out, things have come full circle; my husband is completing his second term as the President of Jewish Family Service. It means so much to me that this agency, that had so much to do with the beginning of my life, has remained an important part of my life. There are so many ways to reach out to our Jewish Community. I feel the most important thing to remember is that it is our responsibility. I feel, by doing this, it honors our ancestors. I feel by giving back, it expresses gratitude to a community that has given me so much.

So in conclusion...

My hope is that there are two things you take away from my time with you today:

Number 1 - "What can't be helped, must be endured."

Or in other words, If you can't change the facts, try changing your attitude.

AND

Number 2 - As we all get back to our everyday lives, I hope that some of you will take a moment and ask yourself:

What can I do, to "repair the world?"

What can I do to give back to my community?

How can I "Pay it Forward?"

L' Shannah Tovah