

I cannot believe that I am standing before you at this Yom Kippur Symposium. My wife, Marilyn, and I moved to Houston in 1976 when I was recruited away from UCLA to join the Department of Ophthalmology at Baylor College of Medicine. We immediately went Temple hunting. Without any doubt, the brilliant sermons of Rabbi Sam Karff and the booming operatic voice of Cantor Arturo Sergi demanded that we join this Temple immediately. And we did. But I never thought that I would find myself standing on this bimah today, sharing a chapter of my life with you.

I always felt that Judaism provided me with a model of how to live my life. I was raised in a family where participation in our Temple was pivotal to the ebb and flow of our daily lives. I grew up as the son of the founding members of Temple Beth Hillel in North Hollywood, California. My dad loved to take the adult education classes taught by Rabbi Morton Bauman, and he studied many hours at our kitchen table so that he would be prepared for the discussions of that week's Torah portion. My mom was President of the Temple Sisterhood. She rose up through the ranks of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods and was a National Vice-President for 16 years. But most influential to me was how my Judaism was intertwined with social action.

My mom spent endless hours as the local, state, and national Sisterhood representative working on the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights. She was always travelling around the country for Sisterhood talking about the YES Fund, Uniongrams, and the need to train women rabbis and cantors at HUC.

As a child, the Jewish holidays defined our lives when the entire family came together to celebrate a Passover seder, or a gala Hanukkah party, or a break the fast. Stories were told over and over again so that me and my sister and my cousins would never forget that my father's family had all been killed in the horror of the Holocaust at Mautausen and Dacho. Stories were told over and over again about how my mother's family had suffered in the pogroms of Russia, but they had the lucky opportunity to immigrate to Pasadena, California.

And the stories continued to be told and retold. Life was good, and safe, and we were proud to be Jews in reform congregations that seemed so relevant to the 50's and 60's. I really felt that my Judaism was somehow linked to family parties and to social action. But one by one, my grandfather died, the aunts and uncles passed away, my parents died, and the family became smaller. Cousins barely knew cousins, and the tight knit family of Pasadena was scattered into a myriad of cities throughout the globe.

But it was within the walls of Congregation Beth Israel here in Houston that we built a new extended Jewish family where stories and memories would be generated for our own children.

Marilyn and I taught religious school here for many years, and of course, our classes would be extensions of our careers. Marilyn taught American Jewish History and The Impact of Jewish Women Throughout the Ages. I taught Human Sexuality based upon the "I and Thou" philosophy of Martin Buber. Marilyn chaired the Adult Education Committee and was a member of the Temple Board of Directors for six years.

Our two children, Seth and Jessica, were consecrated on these very steps, they were Bar and Bat Mitzvahed on this bimah, they were confirmed in this Sanctuary, and then they graduated high school. Jessica, Coby Nathanson, and Amira Wizig were the first Karff scholars, and Rabbi Lyon and Cantor Gerber married Jessica and Mark at the Houstonian Hotel.

But low points of life happened along the way. My sister, Carol, was diagnosed with stage four Ovarian cancer and has been fighting for her life on constant chemo over the last 20 years. That she survives is a medical miracle. The daughter of Carol and Mark Entman, Karen, died at the age of 38 from metastatic breast cancer leaving two young daughters and a wonderful husband in Birmingham, Alabama. At such low moments, our incredibly cohesive extended Houston Jewish family supported our common grief.

Each of the families that made up this larger family claimed a holiday to host at their homes. Carol and Mark Entman hosted the first night Passover Seder with around 60 participants and the running commentary of the Jewish scholarship of Mark. Stew Zuckerbrod had the second night Passover Seder where his parents, who always flew in from New York, played a grandparent-like role for our children. Then Judy and Howard Finkel planned the Hanukkah Latkie party, while Nancy Epstein hosted the lunch on the first day of Rosh Hashanah.

But Marilyn and my niche was the break the fast extravaganza on Yom Kippur which has exploded to well over 150 people including all of our Houston extended Jewish family AND their children AND their spouses AND their kids, and the myriad of friends who Marilyn had the gift of embracing in her energy, and most of the Jewish medical students whom I teach at Baylor. This support fabric of Jewish holidays gives me strength to conquer the low valleys of life and to celebrate the highest peaks of happiness.

When we moved to Houston in 1976, I really believed that we were coming to launch meaningful careers in ophthalmic research and public education, to hopefully create our future family, and to participate in what appeared to be a growing and cohesive Jewish community. I never fathomed that I would ever bury Marilyn in Houston. But two years ago, within two months, Marilyn died of triple negative breast cancer that had metastasized throughout her entire body at the time of diagnosis. She had never been sick a day in her life.

For over thirty-seven years, she had boundless energy as a masterful teacher at Johnston Middle School and Westbury High School and was a stupendous wife, mother, daughter, sister, and best friend to so many. She coached her students to earn fives on their AP tests in American History. These were students whom teachers passively passed in order to create no waves or to draw any attention to their poor reading skills. But Marilyn cared and changed

their lives. In addition, she wrote two books with Marlene Slobin that were published by Scholastic International on teaching creative, relevant, primary-source-based American History. Her students kept in contact with her as they soared as ADULTS in their academic, legal, or artistic careers. At Westbury High School, she focused her energy to create a powerful student council, an award winning yearbook, a knock out prom, a pre-entry orientation week, and college and vocational fairs so the kids could be exposed to the vast gamut of after high school options.

And now after her terrible diagnosis with no possibility of surgical or chemo intervention, there was nothing to do but wait for the silence of death. Word escaped through Facebook, and dozens of her FORMER students flew into Houston from Los Angeles to spend a few minutes with her as they reminisced about her impact on their lives. As she was fading and seizing and dependent on the momentary relief of her anti-inflammatory steroids, her CURRENT students came over to the house every afternoon to finish up the yearbook, to plan the details of the upcoming Prom, and to have her critique their graduation speeches and student loan applications.

Our extended Houston Jewish family realized that only moments remained in her life, so what else could they do in these last hours but plan a party? In two days, they organized a baby shower because Jessica and Mark were six months pregnant with our first grandchild and no one could bear the thought of Marilyn missing an opportunity to celebrate this milestone in our lives. And oh how Marilyn loved that baby shower with all its presents for our future grandson with whom she longed to play and baby sit and do history fair projects. But that was not in her fate. The two evenings before her cancer spread throughout her entire brain, albums she had lovingly assembled to serve as witnesses to our lives were re-examined, and her braveness in facing death without any fear proved to me that her faith was unconquerable. She had performed her Mitzvahs, she had mentored a new generation of teachers as a master teacher at Rice University, she had written her books, she left endless lesson plans for Jessica to use in her classroom, she had transmitted her love of Judaism to her children, and now after her death, Max would be her namesake. We sadly never had the mazel to grow old together and watch Max play and laugh and bring us nachus.

This horrible loss in my life left a massive void. How could I ever conquer the loneliness and loss of a lover, a best friend, a fire ball of a teacher, a woman who loved to shop, and read, and go to art galleries and museums, and work trade fairs and celebrity shows with her sister, Lois, and grade papers, and think of new mind-expanding activities for her classroom?

I feel I gained strength from my interpretation of my Judaism. I come into this sanctuary where memories swarm into my higher cortex. I see our kids on the steps of this bimah clutching their little Torahs at their consecration. I gain strength every time I see a Bar or Bat Mitzvah in front of this ark, and I cry as the Torah is passed from grandparent to parent to child because I remember the memories of those glorious moments in our lives. I walk past her memorial plaque on the back wall of this sanctuary, flanked by the names of her and my parents, and I somehow can move on as I shed tears of remembrance. I walk into Jessica's

classroom in San Diego, and I see the same passion for her students that Marilyn felt for hers. I walk into Seth's law office, and I gain strength in his efforts to fight for justice that was so much a part of my parent's life and my childhood.

Two years ago, this sanctuary was filled with almost 800 people at Marilyn's funeral – HUNDREDS of students from Westbury High School came and paid tribute to a teacher who cared. Medical students, and friends, and co-workers, and our stupendous extended Houston Jewish family came to support our family at the darkest moment in our lives.

I will still give our break the fast party this evening for about 150 of our most intimate friends as we serve the same food that Marilyn would have cooked, and serve it on her hallmark pink plastic plates that she always bought at Arnie's. I have come to realize for sure that although Judaism assures no life after death, that in the silence of death, we live on through our deeds that we performed when we were alive.

There is a beautiful Hassidic story which tries to explain why we rip our clothes at the funeral of a loved one. The physical tear symbolizes the void that has occurred. The challenge is to have memories which might act as little stiches to repair the tear to form a new united fabric on which to move forward. But the Hassidic story adamantly warns that you cannot use the herringbone stitch that makes the tear invisible. You must remember. You must tell the stories over and over again.

On this Yom Kippur 5774, I hope that you and I can find the inner strength to create memories for our children and our grandchildren and our loved ones, so that we leave them with the substance to make the tiny stitches to re-form the ripped cloth, while always hoping that nobody will ever erase our memory with the herringbone stich which the Hassidic story likens to a dense coat of paint that might create forgetfulness.

L'Shana Tova