

**WHY?... WHY me?... WHY us? WHY today? WHY at 10 years old? WHY... so young? WHY her? WHY him? WHY couldn't they do more?**

If I had to guess, many of us in this room, have been forced to ask **WHY...** at some point in our lives. When tragedy strikes, its only natural to question others, **GOD**, clergy, society, authority figures, etc. Unfortunately, in most cases, there is **NO** easy answer as to **WHY...** tragedy occurs.

A few years ago, my family was overcome by tragedy with the loss of a dear loved one. As we gathered to grieve as a family unit, we were all asking the natural question "**WHY?**"... **WHY him? WHY NOW? WHY us? WHY so young?**

During his counseling with us, Rabbi Lyon advised us to first, turn to our Judaism and then to change our question. We should eliminate the **WHY**, and begin to ask **HOW? HOW** will we cope? **HOW** will we learn? **HOW** will we educate others? **HOW** will we remember? And, perhaps most importantly, **HOW** will we grow from this?

And now, only a few years later, when Rabbi Lyon asked me to reflect on **How** Judaism plays a role in my life, I contemplated those same questions. I returned to the **HOW**. How did I move forward? How did I raise my children? How have I lived my life so far? **How** did I become the symposium speaker, standing before you today?

So, **How** does my story begin? I was born in 1960, the youngest of three children in a typical Houston Jewish family. Residents of Meyerland, my siblings and I were guided by our hardworking and loving parents, who included the values and traditions of Judaism in our everyday lives. We were members of Beth Israel. My cousins... who lived on our block... my siblings... and I... all attended Sunday school at the old building on Holman together. I can remember feeling excited standing by my mother as she guided tours for membership of what was then... "the new" building. I remember its seeming vastness... with large windows, tall columns, and beautiful, colorful stained glass. Although even at the age of 6, I realized that Judaism and our Temple played an important role in our lives, I could never truly grasp the monumental influence Congregation Beth Israel would have on me as the years progressed.

My first memories of Beth Israel were playful and welcoming. Then, in 1971, I was forced to see this building through a different set of eyes. At the tender age of 10, I sat with a grieving father and 2 siblings in front of the Bema as we said goodbye to my mother after her long fight with breast cancer. My mother's funeral was my first;... only a few years prior, fear had kept me from my grandfather's service. This sanctuary took on a whole new feel that day;... one of grief and sadness. We were surrounded by family, friends an entire community all begging those same questions: **WHY Tudy? WHY** an active volunteer? **WHY** a young mother

of young children? Those are questions... for which we have never ascertained answers. So looking back, I take those questions and transform them to the... **HOW**.

**HOW** did we cope? **How** did we return to the same sanctuary that would once again represent joyous milestones, occasions, traditions and holidays. **HOW** did I grow up without a mother? **HOW** would I become a mother?

First, I had to quickly learn how to accept the new normal. I went to summer sleep away camp, attended Kolter Elementary School and caused trouble at Beth Israel Religious School.

The year after my mother died, my father and Alene... a woman he was married to for a short time... blessed us with my youngest brother, Billy.

When I was 17, my Dad married Kay Bregman, who had her own three children. Part of learning to cope with the loss of my own mother was wholeheartedly accepting our new, larger blended family of 9. The family unit, dynamics, and household were quite different than what I had experienced in the 1960s, but this was still my family,... and together we would learn to accept the changes and **progress** by loving each other.

A few years later, in 1982, I met and married Scott,... the love of my life. Beth Israel took on a yet another meaning for me that day as I walked down the aisle of the chapel. I was young,... in love,... and ready to start a family of my own. We vowed to love each other in sickness and in health, happiness and sadness, and to lead a Jewish life. As I stood under the chupah that day, I was clueless as to what those vows truly meant and still didn't fully understand that Scott and I... would in fact, experience just that together; **happiness, sadness, sickness and health**. Among our **happiest** moments were when we welcomed our children, Zachary, Megan and Lexie into this world.

From the moment I became a mom, I dedicated every minute to my children. I admittedly was the most over protective, helicopter swarming, volunteering, active and caring parent I knew how to be. There wasn't a social opportunity worth attending if it meant missing a little league game. There wasn't a class party I didn't help plan or PTA Board I didn't eventually lead. One friend joked, "It doesn't matter what teacher your child has as long as Julie is the class parent."

As each of my children were born, Scott and I re-vowed to create a Jewish life for them. I held each of them as Rabbi Karff officiated at their namings and stood next to them, as they became Bar/Bat Mitzvahs. It was important to me that my children saw the value of Tikkun Olam. So I led by example and volunteered in many organizations. I chaired the Children's Party for the American Cancer Society, served on the Texas Children's cancer center advisory board, volunteered in our kids various schools, became an advisor for BBYO and always held positions on the Maccabi Games Steering committees. I was committed to not miss a minute of my children growing up. When I served as advisor for BBYO, friends would ask, "WHY would you give up your Saturday nights for other people's children?" My answer:

"Because I can. And...that is one example of **HOW** I give back to the Jewish community. That is **HOW** I set an example for my children. And, **HOW** I helped to instill Jewish values in my children." Guess what? Hard work pays off!

In 2009, my two daughters surprised us by requesting to transfer from their Memorial public school to The Emery High School, so that they could receive a Jewish education.

You can't imagine my pride... as I've witnessed all three of my children Zachary, Megan and Lexie hold leadership positions in our community. **HOW** did I do that? **HOW** did all three of my children choose... to involve themselves in the community and help others? I instilled strong values in them and, hopefully, paved the way by example.

Were there hiccoughs along the way? Absolutely. Real life is never perfect and my family and I were struck by many disappointments and some heartbreaking tragedies. But through each negative experience, I strived to change my question from 'WHY' to "HOW". I learned how to add light to darkness and not to DWELL on the negative. My life's goal was to be a mother... to be present. Because I had lost my own mother at such a young age, I lived with the fear of my own children growing up without a mother.

When I was told that a test revealed I was positive for the BRCA 1 mutation, a genetic marker that could lead to the same disease that took my mother and aunt, I was devastated, but refused to dwell on the "WHY me". I just asked myself, "HOW can I best use this information to benefit myself and my family." Well, this might be hard to believe, but I am not Angelina Jolie, and my story did not make the cover of People Magazine. Truth be known, in 1996, little was known about BRCA 1. But I took action. I assembled a team of doctors from multiple hospitals and with a host of expertise. With the support of my family, friends, doctors, and a small on-line community, I made the decision to undergo a double mastectomy, hysterectomy and reconstructive surgery. At the time, my doctors considered me a pioneer, the first "previvor" in Texas. A "previvor" is defined as a survivor of a predisposition or increased risk for cancer. I proceeded in my journey by educating and supporting other women who may be in the same position. I was active in FORCE.org, a grass roots organization that has changed national genetic testing policies. I publicly spoke about my experience and choice, talked to the media, created a documentary and to this day work towards generating change where necessary and educating others.

As I enter my 50s, I thought I had seen it all. I lost a mother and aunt, I became a part of a blended family, I faced a health scare, and started my own family. I actually felt that now I would coast through life for a while. My youngest daughter, Lexie, was successfully completing her last semester of college and we were mere months away from clearing our payroll. Although I dreaded life as an empty nester, I learned to enjoy it.

Furthermore, in December 2011, we were delighted that my son, Zachary, became engaged to Jackelyn, a beautiful and sweet girl from Dallas. Both families toasted to future simchas and

celebrations at dinner on the night of their engagement. Zachary and Jackelyn's foremost request was that the heart of the wedding... would focus on family.

But, on Sunday, April 1 of 2012, the joyous feelings came to a screeching halt. I have vivid memories of that day. The overcast skies did not impede the warm climate. I was lazily lounging, watching television and thinking about getting the day started when the phone rang. My sister-in-law, Joanne, had called to let me know that my younger brother, Kirk had passed away during the night. Kirk was just shy of his 43<sup>rd</sup> birthday. I could not fathom life without Kirk. Kirk never missed a family meal, birthday, celebration or holiday. He brought his own unique spirit and style to every occasion, but never arrived without wearing his contagious smile. He had more friends than I could count and was a beloved uncle to his many nieces and nephews.

I remember sitting with my family that day in complete shock. We watched the door expecting that Kirk would walk in any minute, wearing his cheerful smile and a stained t-shirt. One minute, we were laughing about the time Kirk walked into the wrong house on Passover; the next minute we were teary eyed and asking that question: **WHY?**

Rabbi Lyon joined us that afternoon to talk with the family. He wanted us to open up about our feelings, thoughts and favorite stories about Kirk. Again, we asked WHY? WHY did he have to be so young? He advised us to breathe and reminded us that questioning is normal. But, he redirected our question to HOW? HOW would we cope? HOW will we learn? HOW will we educate others?

So, my children, nieces and nephews put their minds to work. They started to brainstorm ideas on different ways to educate young adults about the risks of heart disease. They discussed fundraising opportunities. Eventually, they created a network of Kirk's friends and family and established TEAM KIRK... a group of people dedicated to health and raising money to benefit the American Heart Association. Within a year of Kirk's death, Team Kirk consisted of his friends, friends of his friends and family members. Many Team members ran the Houston Half Marathon in his memory. Team Kirk raised \$17,000 for the AHA . We all know we cannot turn back the clock and remedy Kirk's diseased heart, but we can, and will, change the choices we make in our own lives. I have witnessed my children determine health and nutrition goals for themselves. Then, I too, jumped on the bandwagon and established goals for myself. While I won't be running the 2014 Half Marathon, I have decided to train so that I can join Team Kirk in a 5K. I have taken a few small steps toward improved health and will continue to work toward accomplishing my goals. My family and I used this tragic experience... the loss of a loved one... to help **ourselves** and educate others.

Kirk's death... and subsequent absence from the wedding – caused further dismay as we put the final touches on Zachary and Jackelyn's big weekend. It was heart wrenching to delete his name from an invitation list.

But Kirk was with us in spirit and a key wedding component of family was fulfilled. And the sanctuary at Beth Israel once again became a place of joy and spirit. The wedding was magnificent and the sentiments remarkable. I could never have imagined the extraordinarily moving and heartfelt sensation I would encounter as my son and daughter-in-law performed their vows in front of family and friends. Scott's toast that night focused NOT on giving his son away but on GAINING a new daughter and beloved family member.

From an impressionable 6 year old girl gazing at the beautiful stained glass and massive windows, to the grieving 10 year old who lost her mother, to the 21 year old blushing bride and mother of 3, to the 52 year grieving for her brother and then welcoming a new daughter into her family, Beth Israel, our respected clergy and my Jewish faith have remained an integral part of shaping my life. These spiritual factors have helped me to cope with the hardships and enjoy the happiness. Most importantly, they have taught me that even through hardship, you can redirect your actions toward educating others and making the world a better place. I urge each of you to reflect as I have today. Think about your own life's experiences... favorable and not... and think about what they have taught you and HOW **you** can help others in that regard. Can you learn from mistakes? Can you impact the community? Can you change the world? Absolutely.

Thank you all. Happy New Year and Shabbat Shalom.