

My Grandfather was a Schiff immigrant who arrived in Galveston on the way to Rosenberg. He quickly became a real Yiddishe Cowboy. He heard there was money in raising cattle so he bought a few head, a horse and then opened a saloon. If only they could have seen him back at the shtetel. My grandmother arrived in Rosenberg via Ellis Island and Brooklyn. She was a pianist and an aspiring opera singer. It must have been a very interesting marriage. At her suggestion, he closed the saloon and they opened a dry goods store. They became members of Beth Israel in 1909. Our family lived with them until I was 5 and my sister Rita was 8. In the late 40's we moved to Houston.

My earliest memories of being Jewish were at the Holman Street Beth Israel. They included Consecration services where we each got a flower, Kindergarten in the basement with Ms. Browning stopping by to visit, sitting in services on seats with a wire hat rack underneath and cardboard fans in the prayer-book holders, and Rabbi Schachtel with his deep baritone voice.

The next few years were uneventful but then, when I was 9 we sold our house on Wentworth and bought a larger house not far from South McGregor. Three weeks after we moved in, our world shifted – my Dad died of a heart attack at age 40 and left our mother at 33 with no insurance, no recent work experience, 2 small children and a mortgage payment. She got a job as a pharmacy assistant at the VA Hospital and a few years later got her real estate license. With her small income and a lot of help from our grandparents, we survived. Only in later years did my sister and I learn how difficult the times really were for her. Importantly, I remember that through it all, she showed us a positive and optimistic face, and would assure us that “with God’s help things will turn out OK”. I think that kind of optimism and faith has stayed with me all my life – it’s been the foundation of my faith in the goodness of people and of positive outcomes. Even in the darkest times of my life, it’s been that same optimism and faith that has carried me through.

I think that my Dad’s funeral was my first up close experience of Jewish Community. It was probably the result of the large turnout of family and friends at his funeral and at our house for Minyans. The funeral was at the West Dallas cemetery and I have to admit, the main thing I remember was Rabbi Schachtel’s brand new green 1953 Olds 88. It was the beginning of a lifelong interest in cemeteries -- and Oldsmobiles.

Then, a few months before my Bar Mitzvah, Mom’s real estate license brought her to meet a very kind, considerate, generous and successful real estate developer. Alan was from Russia, had a great sense of humor and gave amazing bear hugs. They were married when I was 14. He became a wonderful step-father for whom I developed great respect, admiration and genuine affection – he was a real mensch. He and our mother operated for years as a team with a large double desk in the company’s main office.

Now life seemed great as we moved into the new house he built for us in Braeswood. He even built one next door for our grandparents after they sold their store in Rosenberg. Our mother and Alan were incredibly supportive and encouraging, telling both Rita and me that we could achieve anything and become anything that we set our minds to, and that they would support us on whatever paths we chose. Rita became a Pediatric Neurologist with six kids and me, well – this is my story.

I had a car at 15 – an old green Studebaker (I really wanted an Olds) and with the support of both parents I got my pilot's license at 17. But then, the same day I got the license, my Grandfather died and we were once again at the West Dallas Cemetery.

I was married at 20, graduated UT at 21 and we moved from Austin back to Houston to work for my stepfather. The very next day my Grandmother died. It was back again to West Dallas. I guess it was after her funeral that I started to equate both the Cemetery as well as the Temple with being Jewish – but it still wasn't a spiritual connection -- not yet -- it was social and cultural, especially during my college years at U.T. Being Jewish then was more about matzah ball soup and attending Seders than being a participant in services.

My spiritual journey had actually begun with my marriage to Phyllis. I got a father-in-law who became my Jewish role model. He was an observant Jew with a quiet kindness and commitment to his Judaism. Through him, I started to understand what it was like to practice one's faith. Every Shabbat Phyllis' Mom would light the candles and he'd recite the Kiddush before dinner, and immediately after would head for Shabbat services (back then they began at 8:15). That's when we began attending Shabbat services at Beth Israel, where we were now members in our own right. After a few years I started relearning many of the prayers that I'd forgotten the day after my Bar Mitzvah. Unfortunately, I had lots of opportunities for reciting Kaddish at funerals for more aunts, uncles and cousins on both sides of the family. I guess that between my learning from my father-in-law and my continuing interest in our West Dallas Cemetery, I began my journey to become an active member of the Jewish Community and began to feel a comfort in prayer. Little did I know that events to come would lead me to a more personal relationship with God.

The first years of our marriage began with great optimism. During those years Phyllis and I had Adam and Julia. We built a house in Meyerland that was 5 minutes away from both sets of parents, who were willing babysitters. Life and work were a joy. Then, the economy started to tank and my stepfather, who had become overextended and deeply in debt, died of a heart attack at 57. His creditors descended, foreclosing on almost every asset, and I was out of a job -- but I remained an optimist.

The years that followed had both Simchas and Tzuris and served to intensify my relationship with God. There were births, deaths, disappointments and celebrations. There were prayers for healing, prayers at more funerals, prayers of thanks and even prayers for guidance in job searches. The fact that many felt like they were actually answered strengthened my optimism and belief in the power of prayer. Then, I believe that God was working through a friend, and I

was offered a great position as a part owner and CEO of a successful title insurance agency. With it came a bit more self-confidence. I began to participate in the Jewish Community, first (is it any surprise?) as a member of the Beth Israel Cemetery Committee (that lasted for almost 40 years) and then, over the next 10 years as a board member of Beth Israel, the JCC, Hillel and the ADL.

And then came the recession of the mid 80's and early 90's when life's roller coaster headed downhill again. The company I headed closed its doors and I found myself unemployed once more. At 50 with the economy in freefall, I was unable to find another executive position. As a result, for many years, I took whatever work I could get, but I never lost my faith that something wonderful was just around the corner. I do have to admit that occasionally I would think to myself "God's taking a vacation?" Phyllis became the family's primary breadwinner and we used up most of our savings. During that time, we had to sell our home in Meyerland and our marriage of over 25 years came to an end. Single with no savings, I began talking to God every morning and that continues today. I began every morning with a short prayer thanking God and asking him to just show me the path to follow and I'd do the walking (I even spoke to him before I came up here this afternoon).

During those years, the Jewish community and Beth Israel were there for me and my family. Our dues were reduced to almost nothing, and after our marriage ended, I joined the Beth Israel divorce support group, got help from temple members with job searches and received high-holiday tickets when I couldn't afford to continue my membership.

Then an old friend from Rosenberg helped me get an interview with the City and that turned into a position working for Mayor Lanier. That mitzvah continues today because 18 years ago when Lanier left office I was offered a really great position working in County government and I accepted it immediately. Once again I believe that it was God working through my friend.

Twelve years ago Joy and I were married. I not only got a wonderful, loving and spiritual partner, but also added two great sons to my "perfect" son and daughter. It's also given me a Rabbi for a daughter-in-law and two genius grandchildren. Joy and I frequently attend Shabbat services as well as Melton classes at the JCC, Yiddish lessons every week and I'm even taking Hebrew lessons as well. My only regret is that I didn't embark on these learning adventures years ago.

For these 18 years that I've been at the County I've truly loved my work; still during this time there have been a bump or two. About 7 years ago I had complete kidney failure. For over a year I was having dialysis at home every night, but no one at the County knew and it didn't stop me from continuing to work full time. Houston's Methodist Hospital told me that I'd be on their transplant waiting list for 5 to 7 years. This was really disappointing news, so as usual I asked God to just show me the path to find a quicker program. And He did. Within a few months I'd discovered a fairly new transplant program in Indianapolis that had a much shorter waiting list. I applied for admission and they accepted me into their program. One year later,

during our visit for my first annual transplant physical the phone rang in our hotel room on the day we were supposed to return home. There was a kidney waiting for me. The transplant took place that evening. We remained in Indianapolis for the required two months with Joy being my incredible caretaker. Then we were back in Houston and a month later I resumed work feeling better than ever. I only had to wait a total of 18 months from the day I started dialysis.

Even with the kidney issues, these 18 years have been the most satisfying of my work career, and I know exactly who to thank for that every morning. For almost all of these years I've been the Director of Harris County's Community Services Department which includes (no surprise) the operation of the County's indigent burial program and two County indigent cemeteries with almost 1,000 burials a year.

I think that as I came into my 70's, cemeteries understandably began to hold an ever closer interest to me. At this point in my life, I'm reminded of the song the orchestra was playing as the Titanic sank "Nearer My God to Thee".

This past weekend I attended memorial services at our West Dallas Cemetery. I visited the graves of my family which now include my mother and sister. Last night at Kol Nidre, and today at Yiskor, I'll talk to God and I'll remember and speak the names of all those that touched my life and have gone on, especially those who've guided me along paths that have given meaning to my life and to being a Jew. I'm reminded of a quote from the author and neuroscientist David Eagleman, "There are three deaths. The first is when the body ceases to function. The second is when the body is consigned to the grave. The third is that moment, sometime in the future, when your name is spoken for the last time." And then there's the last line of the reading that we repeat at Yiskor "As long as we live, they too will live, for they are now a part of us as we remember them". They're all now part of me, my Judaism and my relationship with God.