

I am that Jew. That tall Jew. That “let’s do it!” Jew. That “I never met a stranger” Jew. That “mother to two kids, who knew it would be so hard?” Jew. That fundraiser Jew. That Shabbat Services-attending Jew.

For more than 25 years I’ve sat in this sanctuary and attended the Yom Kippur symposium many times. Most speakers reflect on their reticence when receiving the invitation to speak. I didn’t-but my husband did! I’m convinced that Jon married me because of my good looks and sparkling personality but he knows that my personality can be a little, um, too sparkly.

“How Judaism has shaped my life?” For me, the question implies an outward force that molds and guides behaviors and outlooks. To me, Judaism is internal. It’s as much a part of me as my bone and blood and sinew. It’s always been that way. Maybe because my name is Leah Rachel Nusynowitz Gross. Oy!

I was born in Honolulu, Hawaii. After statehood, thank you very much. My dad was an army doctor and my mom, a teacher-both New Yorkers. They found themselves in the middle of the Pacific Ocean without the familiarities of home, family and deli. When I was in utero, my mom couldn’t take it anymore. She needed a corned beef sandwich but there were no delis, so she made her own. My first taste of Judaism!

Daddy eventually received his orders and my whole family moved to Fort Bliss in El Paso. We lived on a horseshoe-shaped street that had a huge park in the middle. We were the only Jewish family, but there were a lot of Catholics-at one time, there were 68 kids on our street. Summer nights were filled with games. In winter, sidewalks and front porches were decorated with luminarios-except for ours. Ours was dark. My parents refused-because we were Jewish. What would have looked like a bright smile of lights, our house looked like a missing tooth. I begged them to allow us to have the lights but to no avail. The neighborhood kids said we ruined the way the street looked.

I attended Travis Elementary, located just outside the base’s gates. Travis’s student body was 90% Mexican-American. I was practically the only white kid in my class. Definitely the only Jew. My teachers used me to explain Hanukkah every year. My classmates were concerned about my soul-“Hey Leah, we really like you, but you don’t believe in Jesus and you’re going to go to hell!” I told them that Jews were God’s Chosen People-so there!

We attended synagogue on the Army base at Chapel No. 3. Most of the congregants were retired WWII military personnel. We were the only family with small kids, so my brothers and I were the targets of head-patters and cheek-pinchers. We lunched in the synagogue’s social hall and enjoyed our Kosher Zion sandwiches. “Send a salami to your boy in the army?”-that was us.

Chapel No. 3 was a low-slung brick building with benches and red velvet cushions. The siddurim were placed on bookshelves that lined our sanctuary. The shelves had in-set archways. I remember remarking to my mother—"isn't it neat how they built the bookshelves like that?" She said that the building wasn't originally a synagogue—that after the war it was repurposed as a synagogue. "What was it before?" She said that it was a bakery, and the bookshelves were where the ovens originally were.

We lived Kosher-style. No mixing dairy with meat, no shellfish, no pork—except when we went to the Chinese Blossom. My parents spoke Yiddish when they didn't want my brothers and me to understand. I begged for them to teach me. They wouldn't. My dad regrets it now.

Passovers always included enlisted Jewish soldiers. We heeded the Haggadah's declaration: "All who are hungry, come and eat." Those poor teenaged boys—away from their families and in the home of an Army colonel. They looked so nervous!

The feeling of being different sometimes crept into the security of Fort Bliss. When I was six and on the swingset with my friend Mary, a teenaged bully approached us and started taunting me. "Dirty Jew!" "You should have burned up in Germany!" I was scared and ran to tell my father. He marched out of the house and dragged the kid by his ear into our house "for a talk." That boy never bothered me again. Another time, the tires on our cars were slashed. Jewish epithets scrawled on our sidewalk. Though I was different, I was never ashamed.

I was the first Bat Mitzvah at Chapel No. 3—pretty radical stuff for a conservative synagogue. The mishpacha didn't fly in for it and I didn't get the big party. But I smile now at the thought of a Jewish girl having her Bat Mitzvah in the presence of those ovens.

My mom was a proud Jewess. She founded the first Holocaust education program in our public schools and even restored a fringe of the Jewish people—when it was endangered of being lost. Her friend Jean, who had learned that her mother was Jewish, became my mom's Judaica project. Jean's kids started attending religious school and celebrating the holidays with us. Lesley, who I'm still friends with today, married a Jewish man, created a Jewish home, and raised a Jewish family. Her daughter Hannah will be marrying a Jewish man this spring.

Our Judaism was more than just synagogue. Whenever we watched television, and a Jewish actress appeared, my parents would say, "Jewish!" When the Nobels were awarded, and the recipient's name was announced, they would declare, "Jewish!" When a politician spoke, again, "Jewish!" These exclamations were made with pride. Of course, we've maintained this tradition.

Dad retired from the army—and took a position in San Antonio. I went to UT and following graduation, moved to Houston to attend the UH Law Center. My mom was my support system, my sounding board and my best friend. Trips to lunch and to Loehmann's were a regular occurrence.

During my third year of law school, my dad called to tell me that my mother had been in an accident. “please come home.” You have to understand that the entire time I was in college and in law school, my father never phoned me. Not once. So something really dreadful had happened. “Can’t I meet you at the hospital?” He said no, we’d go together. When I drove up, I saw family friends waiting for me in the driveway. Their faces. My dad came out of the house looking stricken. “Let’s go see mom!” Daddy said, “She’s gone.” What did he mean, she’s gone? She had been riding her bicycle in the neighborhood. Mama skidded on the path, fell into the road and was hit by a car. She died instantly.

Mama was everything. Mother, teacher, author, comedienne and balabusta. Before that ride, she spoke to each of her kids. All three of us were in graduate school and were never home. Looking back, the fact that she reached all of us, told my brothers and me how proud she was, and how much she loved us was a miracle. Did God have anything to do with that?

After her funeral, I resumed summer school and focused on what I had to do. She’s been gone for 30 years; I am now her age when she died. She never met my husband—obviously, never met my children. I don’t know to this day if I’ve properly grieved.

Shortly after her death, God sent me a gift. My brother Murray was hired as the UH Law Center’s Assistant Dean of Admissions. I was already a law student when he started! We grew even closer and I got to know his coworkers and friends. After graduation, I joined the Houston office of a Midland firm that specialized in oil and gas. I was the first Jewish woman at the firm. They did not know what to make of me!

My Judaism even brought me to my bashert. I had joined The Matchmaker Dating Service at the JCC and the very day I registered, I met Jon Gross. As we got to know one another we learned our families shared a lot of similarities. His dad was a doctor; so was mine. Same-sized families. His mom and grandma were Harriet and Esther, as were mine! Was a divine source pushing us to each other? Eight months later we were engaged. I knew that my mom could not help plan our wedding; where we would even be married? But Jon said we should be married at Beth Israel where he was already a member. I did not know it at the time, but that decision would point us toward Jewish living in a wonderful community that yielded life-long friendships. And we would be married by Rabbi Karff.

Three weeks before our wedding in 1990, I learned that Murray had collapsed while exercising. We’ve all had those phone calls. After waiting, the doctors’ initial diagnosis was that he had some sort of heart leakage—but they had to open him up to see for sure. Instead, they discovered an angiosarcoma of the heart, a very rare and malignant cancer.

Murray fought hard. His first goal was to be well enough to attend our wedding. After receiving this devastating and terminal news and having open heart surgery, he stood up for us and celebrated with us. He blessed Jon and me and wished us the happiness he enjoyed with his wife Sheri.

In January of 1992, Murray was in his final stage of illness. The nearly two years of chemo were a bust. He was still working at the Law Center, a beloved figure by now. One day, I received a call from his boss, the associate dean, asking if I could work in Murray's stead until he got better. I jumped at the chance—it allowed me to leave the practice of law (I wasn't happy), while helping my school and my brother. Days were filled with meeting applicants and calls to Murray. He taught me how to do the job from his hospital bed. I'd visit him each night after work and we would discuss the day. He was brave and suffered so much. On April 14, he died. He was 33.

We had one day to mourn before Pesach. Jon called then Assistant Rabbi Lyon for advice. How do we observe? Rabbi Lyon shared his wisdom, and that holiday saved me. The relatives who had come in from out of town for Murray's funeral stayed for Seder at our house. I had to get ready, and being elbow-deep in matzo meal and schmaltz was my therapy. The comfort of telling the Exodus story and giving thanks for our liberation was, well, a godsend. That Seder was one of the most significant moments of my life. A celebration with a subtext of grief—it is not unlike the wedding simcha where we break the glass to mourn the Temple's destruction. Isn't that Judaism? Joy and sorrow?

Life went on. My daughter Elizabeth Miriam came along and then 15 months later Benjamin Henry arrived (whom we've always called Bubba). We settled in as a young couple does and with both of us working professionals, child care was mandatory. Off to the JCC. Again, it was the start of another life-long commitment to the Jewish community for the benefit of our children and also for us. And the kids were completely happy at "Birthday Alyce".

The children were healthy, but Bubba was beginning to plateau. He met the important milestones and then, stopped. After more than a year of visits to pediatricians and child development specialists, he was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. On the autism spectrum.

Therapy, therapy, therapy. And we always moved forward. Our expectations for him were high; we weren't going to cloister him. When the kids were old enough, we enrolled them in the religious school here at Beth Israel. From their teachers we learned that both kids couldn't sit through chapel. My husband, ever the athlete, decided to train the children to sit through services without fidgeting. So when the kids were pre-schoolers, we started attending Friday night services as a family. We came to about 95% of the Shabbat services here until they graduated high school. Many of you here have seen them grow up. Judaism was shaping our lives again...and theirs.

During this time we began to know our fellow congregants. We've made friends and we've become involved. We've grown close to the clergy and the staff and were sad when rabbis moved on to make their way with their own congregations, but happy to welcome the new rabbis and cantor.

With Elizabeth's abilities and with Bub's learning and social deficits, they found their places here. At their B'nai Mitzvahs, Lizzy chanted her parshat flawlessly and Bub did so well that everyone cried. In Reform Judaism, there's a place for everyone. We're proud of them! Of course, we've had our nachas and tsoures with our children as all parents do. They are on great paths and know who they are Jewishly. They are on the five-year plan, but they will graduate college-Bub from UT; Liz from UH.

Even though I have a strong Jewish ethnic and cultural identity, have been observant, run a Jewish household and cook great meals like a real Yiddishe mama, I've never really felt religious. Or is it close to God? Or felt his presence?

After 17 years of working at the UH Law Center, I needed to make a professional move. I was interviewing at a number of places but nowhere felt right. Then, Bub had a health emergency and landed at Texas Children's Hospital. We were there for eight days and he had four surgeries. While I was by Bub's side I thought to myself, I need to work here.

I submitted my application and was invited for an interview. That went well, and I was scheduled to meet members of the team. When I presented my business card at the team interview (it included my maiden name) one of the women looked at my card-and then looked at me. "Are you related to Murray Nusynowitz?" she asked. "Yes, I'm his sister." She gushed about how wonderful a person he was, what a shame that he passed so young and asked me to tell my story to the group. Everyone was moved-and I was invited back for another set of visits.

In the interim, I bumped into another team member at a doctor's office. With a third, I knew her parents and grandparents; I had worked with a fourth at UH. One coincidence after another-was a divine hand opening doors? Then, on Erev Rosh Hashanah in 2013, while wearing my smart black suit and ready to walk out the door for High Holy Day services, I received a call. Texas Children's offered me the fundraiser job. What a way to start the New Year!

Ten days later, Adrienne Scott delivered her Yom Kippur sermon. "Look around you," she spoke. "Open your eyes and see God's presence. What you may think are coincidences, is really the presence of the Almighty." I shuddered. Jon looked at me and smiled. I had felt God's presence, but hadn't opened my eyes and heart to feel it.

Our 25th wedding anniversary was approaching, and I wanted to mark the occasion with something significant. Since 2009, I had been lobbying Jon to go to Israel. I was hoping it would be for our 10th anniversary-but it didn't happen. He's a tough negotiator; he said he wanted to do it right-first class all the way. And finally, our time came this year to travel to Israel on Beth Israel's congregational trip.

They should call it a congregational journey. Rabbis Lyon and Herman prepared us well and by the time the 43 of us arrived, our hearts and minds were open to all that Eretz Yisrael

offered and stood for. We learned about this land of heroes and prophets, of survivors and politicians, of fighters and defenders, of innovators and thinkers. I drank it in, and was moved. Tears flowed the first time I saw Jerusalem at my feet when we were atop Mt. Scopus. Tears flowed as I heard stories in Tsederot, a town that is frequently rocketed by Palestinians. Every experience we had—trekking Masada, dining with lone soldiers, descending to the City of David, visiting a reform congregation, and seeing Israeli and Jewish cultural treasures and antiquities—one theme emerges. People in Israel choose to live, really live. Our people created this vibrant state from ashes, they made the desert bloom by coaxing orchards from a barren landscape and they do what’s just when their neighbors do not. I didn’t think my Jewish identity could be more fully formed before I visited Israel. I was wrong.

Judaism, for me, is both internal and external. And I’m more committed than ever to our people, our culture, our religion and our teachings. With Jon's support, I’m dedicated to the institutions that ensure that the Jewish story is told. Beth Israel and the JCC have been such an important part of my life; I can’t be the Jew I am without them.