

The other afternoon at 5:00 p.m. I was driving down Holcombe, the sun was shining in my eyes, and it was HOT! I was wondering, "What am I doing in Houston, Texas at age 71?" You see, I was born in Havana, Cuba and lived there until I was 15 years old. My name is Teresa Stoger, and I am a Jewban. It is a positive term coined by one of my cousins in the 1960's when we left Havana, Cuba. Now Cuba and Houston do have at least one thing in common; they're both really hot!

My life in Cuba was wonderful. My school was very progressive, and Temple Beth Israel where my family belonged, was a reform synagogue with 60 families - all of them active participants in the Jewish life of our shul and our community. We ALL even had Seder together every year. And even though Cuba was 99% Catholic, life was good as we created our own community, stringing vegetables and fruit to adorn the Sukkah, dressing in costumes for Purim, attending services and Sunday school, and just being part of one another's lives. Everyone knew me. Everyone knew EVERYONE! I felt a special spiritual bond with my community as we shared holidays, food, and all of life's cycles, both good and bad. If the embassy called or the hotels called because there were Jewish people in Cuba for the holidays or for Shabbat, we would welcome them with open arms. No Jew was a stranger.

When I was 11 years old, I felt very grown up; so I asked my parents if I could attend the 2nd day of Rosh Hashanah with my Uncle Joe who was more traditionally observant and celebrated 2 days. Uncle Joe (may he rest in peace) used to give us 'pesetas' quarters, if we would sing a stanza of "Adon Olam". Our pockets always jingled!!! My parents agreed, and I went with my uncle. After about an hour, I was bored. None of my friends were there. I went outside where there was a large veranda (the Shul was on the 2nd story), and I sat and observed the world! I mean, isn't that what you're supposed to do on Rosh Hashana. The rabbi came outside soon after and sat down next to me. I asked if the Rabbi was bored. He said: No, that he just needed a break. We chit chatted for a bit. He said that it was okay for me to be outside because "G-d is everywhere." I reflected on this statement, digested it, and it follows me everywhere to this day. God is everywhere, ever-present, wherever we are, wherever we find ourselves, no matter what. I think that simple and also very complicated phrase is the basis of my Jewish spirituality. But as I grow older, I know that remembering God's ever presence is not enough, we must all do exactly what I was doing on that veranda, we must observe.

In January of 1959, Fidel Castro took power in Cuba. In July of 1960, my mother took us on a summer vacation to Miami Beach from which we never returned. Even though many in my family have returned to Cuba several times, including my children and myself, it is not the same, and it probably will never be the same.

We lived in Miami Beach, then moved to Bloomfield, New Jersey, and then my parents and siblings moved to Houston, Texas. By then, I was attending Rutgers University; so I did not

move to Houston with them. During the winter break, I visited Houston, and my mother encouraged me to go out with some of her friend's college sons and daughters. They took me to a party, and... they left me there. I didn't know anyone. I had to call my father for a ride home. I did not feel very welcomed. I felt far from home. It was one of those moments when I forgot that God is everywhere. God seemed far away and I didn't have a clue where to look for God.

After 2 years, I transferred to the University of Miami where I met my first husband in August of 1964. We were married that same December. I was 18 years old, and he was 28. I needed roots. I was searching for a family. I wanted the same feeling of belonging, of being enveloped in the warmth of community that I had felt in Cuba. I was delighted because he was a member of a conservative temple in Coral Gables, Fla., ...Beth David. The congregation was so large, it was divided into chavurot. They were happy to have me, and I was even happier to have found the extended family for whom I was longing. Not until I had found community did I realize what a void there had been in my life.

Five years into our marriage our children Sheryl and William were born. Twelve years later, we divorced. The next five years were difficult. As a single mom who was teaching and studying for a double masters, I felt tapped out, and when I turned to my chavurah at Beth David, they did not embrace me as they once had when I was married. Again, it did not feel as though God was everywhere.

In 1982 my parents suggested that I move to Houston and work with my Dad in his business. The move would be good for my children and myself. It was going to be a big change, but change can be good. I mean, that's why we're all here today, right? My kids and I were looking forward to this new journey. When we arrived in Houston in June of 1982, it was so hot that you could fry an egg on the sidewalk – not unlike the other afternoon when I was driving down Holcomb. Some things never change!

At first, having 2 brothers and their families and my parents here was wonderful. We were involved socially and met many of their friends. It soon petered out, and we were by ourselves and quite lonely. After all, everyone had a life and friends before we arrived and went back to that life seamlessly. Even with family nearby, I did not feel as though I was embraced by community. I did not feel the ever presence of God.

It was during this time that Hedy Lew, a 1982 Yom Kippur Symposium speaker spoke about moving to Houston as a single parent of 3, lonely, with family in Houston but really alone. She reached out to other single parents to try to form an extended family with a common sense of longing for community. During her lecture, I began to cry. "G-d is everywhere," I FINALLY remembered. God is listening to me. Immediately after Hedy spoke, I made my way to where she was sitting. I tripped over a gentleman, who introduced himself. His name was Ken Herst (may he rest in peace). He was my first and best friend in Houston. We formed an extended family of 15 or so single parents for many years. Once again the feeling of being Jewish, of being a part of a tribe was wonderful. I felt that God was everywhere, especially in the

hearts and hands of those with whom we celebrated holidays and Shabbat, and it was through this group that I met my husband Martin and subsequently his son Jonathan; we will be married 25 years in November.

While I have always relied on the synagogue and Jewish singles groups and interest groups to help me reach out to others, it seems that nowadays folks rely on apps and technology to connect. This year I read about an app in the Houston Chronicle called Bumble that helps people find platonic friends. But no device can replace the face-to-face smile, the hug, the laughter of a friend. When you look into the eyes of those in your tribe, you know that God is everywhere – not so much when you're staring at a screen.

This past year I was fortunate to be a part of the Israeli trip with Rabbi Lyon and Rabbi Herman. When you make a pilgrimage to Israel with members of your community, you form connections that last forever. The best part was that my daughter Sheryl was my companion. Israel was incredible. It once again opened my eyes to the wondrous feeling of belonging. In Israel I could feel that G-d is everywhere. Like Havana, Israel felt like home, like the place I could belong effortlessly. It was a place where I wanted to share part of myself as much as others sincerely wanted to share themselves with me. Everywhere we stepped. Every ceremony, every ritual, every interaction felt holy there. What a special treat that was to feel the nurturing nature of home again as I was growing, connecting and become a part of that place and those people.

When I retired, I realized that many of my friends were either school friends from my younger days in Cuba, my extended family, or my teaching friends; I had to start to reach out in different directions to connect. It was truly difficult once again. But now I realize that I am blessed. Reaching out IS the blessing. Reaching out helps me to find God who is everywhere. Sitting around and waiting for God to surround me just isn't the Jewish way. We are the people who never give up the search for God. We search for God in our families, in our synagogues, in the embrace of friends, at work. God is everywhere. That is, as long as we keep looking, God will be everywhere we look. At my age now, some of my friends are gone. But in this season of remembrance, I remember how they brought the light of God into my life when I needed it. It brings to mind Carole King's song, "You've Got a Friend." You may not know this, but in an interview Carole- a Nice Jewish Girl - said that the friend she was speaking of was not really any one person. It was God. Listen to her words:

When you're down and troubled and you need some love and care

And nothing, nothing is going right

Close your eyes and think of me, and soon I will be there

To brighten up even your darkest night

You just call out my name, and you know wherever I am

I'll come running, to see you again

Winter, spring, summer or fall all you have to do is call

And I'll be there, yes I will. You've got a friend

After all, that's why we're all here today because connecting with the essence of God in each other connects us to the God who is everywhere. And when we do this – even when it's difficult, even when it takes real effort and courage, we inevitably change for the better. We continually renew ourselves just like God continually renews creation. And we realize that reaching out to others is actually reaching up to God.

My sense of belonging became only a memory, my community became a memory, my Cuban homeland became a memory. Memory is another core value that my life experience and my Jewish heritage has taught me. Rosh Hashana is the day of memory. Our people survives because we remember. We remember one another, our Torah, our ancestors, and we teach the importance of remembering l'dor v'dor, from generation to generation.

As I look out at you and reach out to you, I hope you know that I see and appreciate God's presence in you, and in this place. Truly, God is everywhere.