

Good Yontif, everyone, and Thank you, Rabbi for asking me to participate in this symposium today.

As many of you may know, this past January, I was privileged to celebrate my second Bar Mitzvah. As I began that adventure, I realized that in spite of having been Bar Mitzvah'd at age 13 and attending religious school thru confirmation, I was not prepared to undertake such an endeavor. So I wondered if I would and could actually do the work to become a Bar Mitzvah for the second time.

I asked myself,:  
What did I want to accomplish?  
How was I going to get there?  
And what would it mean to me?

In my attempt to understand such an undertaking, I came to realize, that when I prepared for my first Bar Mitzvah in 1948, I was doing what was EXPECTED of me. My family belonged to Beth Israel, so when I turned 13, my parents EXPECTED and planned for me to have a Bar Mitzvah, as was the tradition. So I went to Religious School and memorized the Hebrew that I would recite in order to be a Bar Mitzvah.

I am not sure why I didn't learn more about being Jewish at that time. Maybe it was because it was just after World War II, and American Jewish practice was to ASSIMILATE, and any external expression of Judaism such as wearing yamulkes, etc. was avoided.

This time was different. No one EXPECTED me to have a 2nd Bar Mitzvah. It was something I WANTED to do. I WANTED to learn Hebrew, I WANTED to be able to read from the Torah, I WANTED to learn the torah portion, and I WANTED to understand it. And, I did it! In fact one of the things I learned in my Parsha is that G-D called out once again...this time not to Abraham as we read in the Rosh Hashanah service this past week, but this time it was to Moses.....G-D told Moses to go to Pharaoh and get Pharaoh to "Let my people go!" but that's another story...

In addition to this extraordinary experience, and I don't mean this to be a commercial for 2nd Bar Mitzvahs.... there have been other events in my life that have formed my religious beliefs.

So what happened in the 70 years between my two Bar Mitzvahs that impacted my Jewish feelings and made me want to become a more knowledgeable, active participant in my religion. There are several specific events that I recall that have made Judaism important to me....And as with all of us, MATURITY helped me understand the importance of religion in my life.

1. After I finished Medical School, I moved to Iowa City, Iowa to do a residency at the University of Iowa. One of my professors there invited me to Yom Kippur services and

gave me the honor of holding one of the Torahs for Kol Nidre. What a warm and generous gesture and a memorable occasion for me. WOW!

2. When I finished my training in Iowa, I moved to Galveston where I taught at the Medical School and fulfilled my obligation to Uncle Sam as chief of Ophthalmology at the Public Health Hospital there. By now I had 2 children of Sunday School age, so we joined Temple B'Nai Israel. Well, they need teachers for Sunday school. So, I began teaching Sunday School having to LEARN in order to teach, and I was barely a week ahead in my preparation for each class. When I had completed my military obligation, we moved back to Houston and I began my medical career, which I still enjoy today.

By now, my children were ready to start school and since I wanted them to have a Jewish education, they were enrolled in the Beth Yeshurun Day School. During that time we had the opportunity to go on Rabbi Jack Segal's first family mission to Israel. I still remember the feeling of flying on El Al airline to Eretz Yisreal and bursting into song as the plane began landing. I remember praying on the beach every morning wearing a kippah and prayer shawl. I remember praying at the Western Wall and best of all, seeing my 2 boys, Mark and Darryl, Bar Mitzvah'd at the Wall. Another WOW!!!

So now fast forward to 1989, the year Jackie and I married. She was living in Dallas, so I went there to be with her for High Holiday services at Shearith Israel, a conservative synagogue, where she had belonged for many years and had a close personal relationship with the clergy. I found the services there beautiful, and it was a very warm welcoming community.

But, after several years, Jackie moved to Houston and we made our way back to Beth Israel that had been my original place of worship, and where I had the personal relationship with the clergy. In fact, it was, our dear friend, Rabbi Sam Karff that married us! Yet another WOW !!!

So here I am back at Beth Israel, and I am delighted that now some of those outward expressions of Judaism that I have learned to enjoy, like wearing a Kippah and Tallis, especially on the high holidays, have become part of the accepted tradition here. Just look around! I am very glad to be back where I started my religious journey.

So, somewhere along the way, and I am not exactly sure when, I realize that many of the tenets of Judaism are the guiding principles that I rely on in my personal life and in my medical practice. As an ophthalmologist, with special training in Pediatric Ophthalmology, I not only deal with my patients medical issues, but I need to understand their emotional needs and concerns as well as the needs and concerns of the PARENTS of my pediatric patients.

Often my biggest challenge is helping the parent deal with their children's condition, and helping them understand the lifelong implications of their decisions in regard to the prescribed and recommended treatment for their child. It's hard to tell a parent of a new born baby that their baby needs surgery. to insure their eye sight.

Or, worse yet is telling a parent there is nothing that CAN be done to help their child see!. That's when I rely on my beliefs to give me the strength, courage, compassion, empathy and patience to explain and have such dire situations understood and accepted.

So here I am, having practiced medicine for over 50 years and at age 83, still questioning, and searching for answers, and looking forward to the next phase of my life and my relationship with my religion. Jackie often says she started growing up in Houston and it looks like she is going to finish growing up in Houston. So, in the same vain, I started my religious training at Beth Israel and it looks like I am going to finish my religious journey here at Beth Israel. Soooo....

In 13 years, when I am 96 years old, with G-D's help, like my late father in law Lou Kless, I will celebrate my 3rd Bar Mitzvah...

And,.... you are ALL invited!

Shana Tova