

Yom Kippur Symposium

Several years ago, after I had a thoracotomy for stage 4 melanoma, Rabbi Lyon asked me to speak at the Yom Kippur Symposium. I respectfully, and in good conscience, declined.

This time, when he was nice enough to repeat the invitation, one of the truly great influences in my life, my daughter Tara, told me, in no uncertain terms, that I would speak and, she would like my talk to make people cry because, year to year, those have been her favorite speeches at the Symposium.

Thankfully, I have nothing to relate that would cause tears, although like all families, we have had our share of sadness and heartbreak. If not tears, my daughter said, I had better be charming! In thinking about what I would or could say today, I realized that four women have been my religious strength during times of good and bad; and they have, for different reasons, been grounded in Judaism.

I am a native Houstonian, born at St. Joseph's Hospital, the only maternity hospital in Houston at that time, on the same day that my Doppelganger and friend, Don Aron was born. My family lived in Bellaire, Texas, I can remember the whole family sleeping in the living room after my parents purchased a window unit, but I do not remember going to religious school at

the Old Temple. Clearly, the air conditioning was more significant to me than my Judaism. I knew I was Jewish, my family was Jewish, and most of my parents' friends were Jewish, Beth Israel Jewish.

Even when we moved to Wharton, around the time I was 12 years old, I felt Jewish. And, I have solid memories of being Jewish, living in Wharton.

Wharton had a population of 8 to 10 thousand people. Of those, maybe 50 were Jewish. Wharton had a Conservative/Orthodox Congregation that we did not belong to it because my family was Reform and very proud of it. And when I say Reform Jews, I mean Hanukah Bush, Christmas Trees and only token observance of Jewish holidays. My Dad could have cared less, but my mother was going to make certain that I would be confirmed at Congregation Beth Israel, just as she had been. My mom who helped mold my Jewish identity, would schlep me to Houston, every Saturday morning, until I was confirmed. My parents did not care or discuss with me Bar Mitzvah, and I did not have one which has, at times, made me feel like a second class Jew.

Maybe at 83! My maternal grandmother, Johanna Schwarz Leon, Mama Jo, lived with us. She observed every Jewish occasion by going to her room to pray. On Friday nights, she would light candles in her room. She was an amazing woman who lost her husband, Robert Leon, when my mom was 10

years old. He died, leaving her with 3 children: my mom, her younger brother, Adolph and a younger sister, Maxine. He had owned a piece of property in downtown Houston which was used as a parking lot, the Auditorium Parking lot. At the age of ten, my mom was parking customers' cars and smoking cigarettes in the back seats of some of the cars. My grandmother, who was a major female force in my life, loved one thing in this world, and it was me (sorry, Rusty!) I never wanted for any love or support. My Dad instilled in me a sense of hard work and honesty. He believed that a man's word was his bond. He was Jewish, but not observant at all. He loved me, but was very reserved, especially with outward expressions of love. No problem, my Mama Jo and my mom made up for it. Still, other than High Holy Days and schlepping into Houston for Saturday School, I had no other Jewish influence in my life. I knew I was a Jew, and we were different from other people and some people didn't like us, still, it did not diminish my view of myself; and I lived a very happy teenage life.

Wharton was a small town. Our schools were segregated, and most of the upper crust didn't like Jews. I played sports and chased girls and that was all I really cared about. One kid called me a dirty Jew at football practice, and it embarrassed me. I did not respond. My girlfriend's daddy was president of the

bank in Wharton, and they had never invited a Jew into their home, including me! My parents were not invited to become members of the country club in Wharton because of our religion, and my dad never forgave them. So he and I would drive 30 miles to New Gulf where we played golf at the Sulfur Company's golf course every Sunday morning. My graduation class at Wharton High School was 100 students. I left Wharton to attend the University of Texas where my individual classes would be larger than 100 students. For fraternity/sorority Rush, all students went to Gregory Gym, where Jews were rounded up to go through Jewish Rush— everyone else went through Main Rush. I thought this was weird, but did not question it nor grasp the underlying symbolism. Today, I wonder how that registers on the politically correct scale. So now I got religion! Not really. I did join a Jewish fraternity, Phi Sigma Delta, and loved it. I had friends in the other Jewish fraternities. My entire social circle was now Jewish. I was a Jew and felt pretty good about it; but I had little or no involvement in the practice of Judaism.

I met the most fantastic Jewish girl (I had never had a date with a Jewish girl until I went to Austin). This girl was not just beautiful, but she had "razor lips" and was tough as nails. She was fantastic! We dated for about 6 weeks and

the rest of the five years we were together, we fought like cats and dogs. My kids would tell you that things haven't changed. She was religious—I wasn't. She knew what she wanted, and I had no clue, other than I wanted to be a surgeon.

I never went to class if the class was before 11AM. I was probably the last person in Texas to be accepted to medical school. My acceptance hinged on my agreeing to transfer to the new medical school in San Antonio when it was completed. So I was in the first graduating class at UtMSSA. I attended the medical branch in Galveston for my first two years; I joined a Jewish Medical fraternity. There were other fraternities, and unlike Austin, there were no rules about Jewish members in non Jewish fraternities, but all the Jewish students were in the Jewish fraternity. During this time, I decided I better start studying (the first gathering I went to in Galveston, I saw all these guys and a few girls. Almost all of them were Phi Beta Kappa.) I decided then that I might fail out of medical school, but it would not be for lack of trying. I have to say that by this time, Nancy and I were on the same page (so to speak) and she pretty much made sure that I towed the line. At the end of my second year in medical school, I was one of the top five students in our class of 150 at Galveston. Nancy could do student teaching in San Antonio schools so we

married and I honored my commitment to be in the first graduating class. We began our married life in Austin, and moved to San Antonio as my third year of medical school began. My medical school class in San Antonio had a small group of 40-50 students. We made many friends there. Nancy was teaching High School English to kids who were three years younger than she. Our home was Jewish. We celebrated the holidays and no Chanukah Bush was tolerated! I thought little of anything but medicine and family. I graduated from medical school in 1970. As President of the First Graduating Class at UTMSSA, I spoke during Commencement as did Ralph Yarborough, Texas' Democratic Senator. Even then, it was becoming obvious that our health delivery system was inadequate and our country would have to fix it. Well, that worked out well, didn't it? I spoke against Lyndon Johnson's mandated medical delivery for seniors program because I feared government involvement in medical treatment decisions. Despite our government constant denials my fears have proven to be true. But, I could, as the Torah suggests, do good deeds and be a better person. I began to feel that there must be something greater than our lives. The Torah's call to repair the world made sense to me. And my Jewish identity grew, not by leaps and bounds, but in slow, measured steps.

We left Texas for Los Angeles where I had been accepted to a surgery internship at UCLA. We were excited and enthusiastic about this gigantic step. I can remember many long cases where, as an Intern, I pulled on a retractor for hours and then went to make endless rounds. UCLA used the John Hopkins system which meant that the house staff, interns and residents, were on call for their patients 24/7. It was a grueling and inhumane system, but it made the priorities crystal clear: the doctor was responsible for his/her patients at all times. In late spring, I was sent a letter from the Wharton Texas Draft Board that I was being drafted into the Army. I could complete my internship but immediately after would be stationed at Ft. Hood, Texas as a general medical officer. It was 180 degrees away from being an Intern at UCLA. Our oldest sons, Rhett and Jared were born, one year apart, during my two year active duty. Nancy's Rabbi from Austin, came to Temple, Texas, where we lived to give them their Hebrew names. My father had worked a "deal" with Nancy that he and my mother would not have a Christmas tree in their house if she would have the boys circumcised in the hospital after their births and not have a bris! For me, seeing those 2 beautiful human beings come into life, I never could doubt that there was a supreme being—whether

it made sense or anyone could prove it, I knew It was true! And, again my Jewish identity grew.

Nancy, the boys and I returned to Los Angeles for my neurosurgical residency. From Ft. Hood to UCLA was like going from a desert to the jungle.

Immediately I was submerged in the program: my first 6 months were spent at Harbor General Hospital in the Compton area of L.A. The hospital was 40 minutes from our house, even then, Los Angeles had traffic problems! As the junior resident, I had to stay at the hospital every other night. Frequently, I would be called back on my night's off. It was physically, emotionally and mentally exhausting, but I loved it because I was doing what I had always wanted to do! Neurosurgery.

Can you imagine what life was like for Nancy? She, at that time was taking care of two babies who were 52 weeks apart in age with no family and only newly met neighbors to help. Her husband was home, at best, every other night and was exhausted. She had to do everything. As my residency, which I absolutely loved, preceded, our two younger kids were born: Asher and Tara. My home life, except when I rotated through Neurology and the Research lab, was non-existent. Nancy would go grocery shopping with 4 kids. Truly amazing. She made some really great friends, as I did, but the difference

between our lives was unbelievable. She held our family together with her inner strength and her strong Jewish identity. I was merely the Doctor. She had all the strength and depth in our family—just as my mother and grandmother had for theirs. After finishing my residency, I had some fantastic offers to stay in Los Angeles, but Nancy and I loved Houston, and wanted to be closer to our families. By now, in 1978, we had 4 kids, ages 5 and under. We moved back to Houston, and Nancy became immersed in Beth Israel. Through the Day School, Sisterhood and finally becoming a member of the Board of Trustees. She always had a Jewish identity. I was the follower and not the leader in our Jewish home. We celebrated every Jewish holiday except Simcha Torah, it seems. There was never a minute when Nancy did not surround our family in the rituals and faith of a Jewish home.

Determined to make Chanukah as splendid as my parents' Christmas, she taught our kids about the mighty Maccabees and to this day decorates our home for Chanukah with a collection of Maccabee soldiers that numbers in the hundreds.

We have been fortunate. I had busy neurosurgical practice with the hopes of bigger things. Suffice it to say that I have always been an excellent neurosurgeon but not a great medical politician. In some ways I have felt that

I did not reach my full potential due to my lack of political savvy. All of our kids graduated from Lamar High School and all four went to college and earned degrees. One, Jared, went to the University of Texas Law School and graduated Order of the Coif.

We have been blessed by our daughter-in-law, Angie and our son-in-law, Joseph: both are Catholics and seem content to stay that way. We have 7 wonderful grandchildren. Our first born grandchild, Parker, was born 16 years ago, with hydrocephalus; and at 6 weeks needed a shunt, which he will need for life. But, though shunt dependent, he is totally normal, has no deficits and plays sports at his high school. Parker identifies himself as Jewish. Rhett's second son, Pierce, plays every sport but excels in baseball, and as a left-handed pitcher plays on many Premier teams. He presently identifies with no religion. Nancy continually reports to him from the website Daily Jewish Baseball. Jared's two oldest daughters, Chandler and Kendall, aside from being beautiful and smart, have both been Bat Mitzvah here at Beth Israel. They have fulfilled my hopes and expectations. Today, their mom, Angie, is taking Hebrew lessons from Deb Uzick—so who knows! Jared's youngest daughter, Rainey, is unique and at 8 years old, going on twenty, easily wraps me around her little finger. She is the fifth fierce woman to dominate me after

Mama Jo, my mother, Nancy, and my daughter, Tara, who is the Director of Admissions here at Shlenker School. Tara's two boys, Morton and Jonah are students at Shlenker School and are grounded in their Jewish traditions and identity. They are so comfortable being Jewish that recently at their other grandparents' Polish Catholic Church, they gleefully and loudly sang Shabat Shalom!

Our family continues to celebrate all major Jewish holidays; and, I feel confident that most of our grandchildren will be Jewish as adults. Still, it is their choice.

Our youngest son, Asher, has been estranged from us for the last 4 years. He had a successful surgical supply company, but now teaches science in Marshall, Texas. We are talking now, and I pray that this new communication will continue. Two of my sons have had major medical problems in 2012 and 2013. Rhett who directly manages 35 financial advisors in 40 locations and supervises an additional 135 security licensed bankers as Executive Director for J.P. Morgan Securities suffered a ruptured diverticulum that required emergency surgery and a colostomy bag. He lived his life and, during the 6 months he required the bag, he never complained. Jared has his own legal firm, LevinthalWilkins and has been recognized as a "super lawyer" by Texas

Monthly. At 39, he developed a bowel obstruction from colon cancer which spread to the liver. I am so pleased to say that he is cancer free after major liver and colon surgery and chemotherapy. Like Rhett, he never complained. He accepted his situation and fought. My mother passed away in July, 2010, and was a major loss to our family. My dad died in 1980, and I never cease to miss him. Nan's dad suffered from Alzheimer's disease and her mother from dementia. Both have passed away.

Nancy remains healthy which makes sense since she abhors any activity that causes one to sweat...other than Pilates. She would love to return to full time cigarettes, but only smokes at Etheria Salon twice a week. She is the rock of my life, and the center of our family. I developed metastatic melanoma which spread to my lung in 2006. About every 3-4 years I get a tumor recurrence, but I have been lucky: the tumors have been in areas that are amenable to resection. MD Anderson continues to be a beacon of light and hope to me as well as others.

Despite the fact that we are all so different, yet so alike, we face different trials and tribulations and have different successes and failures. I do not see myself as a cancer survivor—I do not let cancer define me.

I realize from my cancer and from my patients who have had malignant brain tumors that death is something we all face. When and where are the only issue. There are two days one should never worry about: yesterday and tomorrow. I live everyday and try to do good deeds which is what the Torah asks of us.

The Jewish family is based on the interaction of all its members, but the framework is that of a Jewish home, its rituals and customs. Through writing this speech, I realize that my family has given me strength to fight adversities through out my life. Judaism binds my family from generation to generation. It is the underlining material of the fabric of my life.