

Yom Kippur Final Copy

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Yom Kippur Symposium; How Judaism has Shaped My Life

*Gut Yontif.*

I am honored to be here this afternoon. But I was a little reluctant. You see I knew that agreeing to speak today would require an exposure of parts of my life that I usually keep to myself.

I am a Jew by choice and I have rarely talked about that to anyone here who did not already know. My mikvah was January 2009.

I am gay and married to Alan Hurwitz. We have been together 40 years as of last November. We have been living with HIV and AIDS for 30 years. That is it for the headlines and I hope it gets easier from here.

I believe in the truth so if we had been talking I would have said so, but I might well not have brought any of this up. I worked as a psychiatrist and you get good at deflecting personal questions.

I am a native Texan. So were my parents and their parents. I was asked once in Torah study before it started if I was raised “religious” and I answered “yes” and let it go as I could not see getting into my history in a room of people. But I was aware that we meant different things by religious. My family said thanks at meals and if the doors of our christian bible based church were open we were there.

There were no Jews, as far as I knew and only a few blacks in the suburb of Dallas that I grew up in. To jew someone was acceptable speech. I was in college before I realized that it was offensive.

I knew I was gay probably in junior high school; but that information was buried deep even to me. I read a lot, did well in school and went with the family to church. I was an eagle scout.

Throughout my life if you had asked me if I believed in God I would have said yes. A lot of the time though it was like a wrestling match where I was just trying to breathe.

I grew up in Irving near Dallas. College at Texas Tech in Lubbock; degree in German. Medical School in San Antonio. Residency in psychiatry in San Antonio. Work in Houston. Life complicated by HIV and treatments for AIDS in Houston. Retired in Houston.

Alan and I met in San Antonio. I was a second year medical student and he was an intern. It was a relationship from the beginning. I remember that first year reading Leo Rosten's "The Joys of Yiddish" and joking with him that I guess that makes me the *shikse*.

At the start we went to our own families for holidays. Alan would light the menorah and I would put up a small tree. We were an interfaith couple. But work and friends were primary and religion was more to the side.

Everything fell down the first year I was in Houston. Work was good and I was on top of the world until we were both diagnosed with HIV. That was the plague then like Covid-19 is the plague now. People you knew just got sick and died. There was no treatment. My doctor said to plan on about 6 months and to get my affairs in order. I listed priorities: work, health and Alan. I did a will. God was not much in the picture.

That changed when my Dad died suddenly in the spring of the next year. He was a healthy overweight 62 who went to bed and didn't wake up. Kissed by God I think they call that kind of death. It threw me back into church for a while here in Houston.

At home for a time I started reading Bible in a way I had not done before. I would read the scripture and all the footnotes on each page. I would note verses that seemed to have meaning for me. That was what I could do as when I was not working I had trouble watching TV other than the evening news. Books left me cold. Slowly things improved.

Work was good. I was good at it and doing triage or consultation psychiatry at the VA you stay busy. I trained psychiatry residents and medical students. Years passed.

For this part of my life Alan and I were an interfaith couple at Beth Israel. I did church here and there trying to make gay work with scripture. Trying to integrate what I knew to be true of the world from science with an understanding of God. Trying not to throw the baby out with the bath water.

We would go to some Friday night services, or Torah studies; but mostly Alan's Yahrzeits and High Holidays. I would go to everything with him that he wanted except Yom Kippur as that was for Jewish atonement and it felt like crossing a line.

In 2000 we bought plots at the Beth Israel cemetery. Several times since then I have heard that the very first thing a group of Jews will do in a new community is buy land for a cemetery. That was when to myself I began wondering about Judaism for me. The Hebrew was off-putting; but I enjoyed reading about the Jewish faith and integrating that understanding with what I already knew and believed.

In 2008 marriage for gays became legal in California. We had talked about it previously and my input was always talk to me when it means something. In California at least for a time in 2008 it meant something.

I told Alan I wanted us to no longer be interfaith and I wanted to meet with Rabbi Lyon and discuss conversion as well as our California marriage. This was in April 2008.

We rapidly moved from the idea of a courthouse wedding to finding a rabbi to do the ceremony. Rabbi Leah Novick agreed. We started adding religious aspects in a hurry. We found an appropriate ketuba. I bought a new kiddish cup. We bought rings. We made travel arrangements, and we were off to San Francisco.

We drove to Salinas the seat of Monterey county, and for the first time in my life we gave our names to the clerk and were issued a marriage license. We drove to Carmel-by-the-sea and met the rabbi and made arrangements for our ceremony the next day.

Rabbi Novick brought two couples to hold the huppah for us. We signed the ketuba, blessed the wine, exchanged rings and vows, were blessed in

Hebrew. One of the four holding the huppah was a rabbinical student and he read a blessing from Rabbi Lyon. We were truly blessed and happy.

That fall I started Hebrew with Dorothy Robbins, of blessed memory, and Basic Judaism with the clergy here at Beth Israel. My conversion was simplified a bit in that I was circumcised as a baby. So after discussion with the rabbis; then a drop of symbolic blood and a blessing; followed a few days later by a mikvah and blessings I was a Jew. That was winter 2009, a Thursday. The parsha that week was Shemot. I think that was the year that Susannah Heschel was a visiting scholar. I remember her talking of the people of Israel crying to God because of their slavery. She pointed out that it is a part of a cure to admit you have a problem. Then you can be helped. Good advice.

I smile every time I remember my first high holidays as a Jew. It started with Selichot. Rabbis Lyon, Scott and Miller and Cantor Gerber were in the chapel with a small crowd and they looked like a pro-sports team at the start of a new season. So much energy and ready to start their season. All the way through to Simchat Torah with the scrolls spread on all the tables to be read.

I continued with class through a second year of Hebrew. Then Alan suggested Melton classes. A new group of mostly women from the Emmanu El sisterhood was starting and I stayed with them once a week for 8 years from the basics of Judaism, denominations, Torah, the middle east, to Israeli literature in translation. We lost a teacher studying Leviticus, Rabbi Judy Abrams of blessed memory. There were two bar mitzvahs, one divorce and one loss of a spouse in the core group and as time went by we added a few people.

Alan and I light the candles and celebrate Shabbat every week. We celebrate the holidays.

At Beth Israel we were fairly regular at services and Torah study especially the first few years. We have settled into a few times a month, Yahrzeits, special services, high holidays and classes. One class we learned to make matzah balls from scratch along with a few other things in the kitchens here.

At home overtime I added recipes like challah and chicken soup and honey cake and brisket and potato kugel mostly from cookbooks. Alan's aunt taught me Mandelbrot.

Alan's family here has always been welcoming. They include us at gatherings and for Rosh Hashannah and Passover.

Passover has always been my favorite holiday. I clean out all the chametz, holding back a few crumbs to burn. We usually take the unopened chametz to Braes Interfaith food bank. It feels like a double mitzvah. Before my mikvah it was easier. As the goy in the house all the chametz belonged to me and Alan had matzah for a week.

It felt strange this year not having Beldon's to shop at. Under the shut down we had passover on our own.

Let me tell you about my most memorable passover. A bit of history; when my mother's health and memory began to decline we helped her move into senior apartments; and then for 10 years I went up monthly to help with her medications and appointments.

I was blessed to get to know her as a person and I hope she felt the same. When she died in home hospice from cancer I was there with her. It was right before Passover 2018. Alan and I had a little seder in our hotel room with matzah and wine and some other kosher food and told each other bits of the haggadah and talked of my mother. I cherish the memory of that time.

My family gathered and she was buried next to my father there in Irving.

I followed Jewish mourning. I said kaddish every time I could. At a year I lit a yahrzeit candle that guttered the first day so that I thought it would go out and then kept burning almost two full days.

Right after that first yahrzeit Alan and I followed her example and prepaid and planned our funerals. That is a hard thing to do, but one day I hope it makes it easier for who has to care for it.

Over time I have reclaimed God and worship while maintaining an acceptance of the flaws in scripture and the reality of evolution and

science. But I don't think I can make a sensible talk about that other than to say that my understanding of God and scripture is in a glass darkly. Talmud says Moses observed his prophecies through a clear looking glass. All the prophets observed their prophecies through an obscure looking glass. For me it is as clear as mud but sometimes the light still shines through.

Kugel's "God of Old" and "How to Read the Bible"; Fowler's "Stages of Faith"; Campbell's "Masks of God"; Borowitz's "Liberal Judaism" Heschel's "the Prophets" and Lyon's "God of Me" taken together with others helped sort my perspective.

God does not change but my understanding has evolved, allowing me to reclaim my faith in God at a deeper level.

Torah or scripture is not perfect, but God can be found there.

People are not perfect but they carry the image of God and can be inspired by the Eternal.

Our understanding of God is not perfect but that's okay, if we walk with God together.

To grab hold of *Etz Hayim*, to be part of a people focused on life and the choices that lead to life, makes one part of something bigger, something more perfect than any single life.

I look back over 40 years with Alan some rough patches but settled into love and comfort.

Both of our families accept us. For a gay couple that is a blessing.

The IRS accepted our California wedding in 2008, so filing as a married couple, even when California had a plebiscite and rolled back the right.

In 2015 the Supreme Court allowed gay marriage everywhere. At our lawyer's suggestion we repeated our marriage here in Texas and Rabbi Lyon did the ceremony in his office.

This year the Supreme Court extended civil rights in employment to gays.

I can hardly imagine being here now from the viewpoint of a little kid in Irving.

We are accepted here at Beth Israel as a couple.

Since I am 11, still a kid, in Jewish years I am starting to think about reading from the Torah in a couple of years.

But for now I pray that all of us are blessed with a healthy sweet 5781, and that together we can rejoice when the current plague lifts and we can gather again here at Beth Israel.