

Symposium Speech

My earliest Jewish memories remain as vividly embedded in my memory as the days I first experienced them - following my grandfather around the dark house with a candle, a feather and a paper bag searching for chometz the day before Passover, watching my grandfather laying T'fillin at the dining room table reciting Hebrew prayers each morning and listening to my father and his sister, Aunt Goldie, arguing about how many pieces of my grandmother's handmade gefilte fish that each would receive. These are cherished Jewish memories that helped shape the person I am today.

I am a 4th generation member at Beth Israel through my mother's family. However, I did not join Beth Israel until 1980 when my husband, Stanley, and I moved back to Houston to settle down. We had been married 7 years and after medical school, for Stanley, Graduate school for me, we returned to Houston for Stanley's fellowship and to think about starting a family and settling down to create our home.

Strangely, the thought of setting down immediately led us to the deep questions of how we would live our Jewish lives going forward. Stanley, who is from Pine Bluff, Arkansas, was very traditionally Reform and I, a native Houstonian, had strong Conservative, almost Orthodox roots. How would we raise our kids? How would I tell my parents we may not be joining Brith Shalom, a congregation my parents helped found, the place where I was raised and married? Beth Israel came to mind – my best friends from growing up, Robert and Alyse Caplan, were members, there was the

Shlenker School and I knew Stanley would feel more at home in a Reform congregation— I was not sure about me! But, we decided to give it a try.

I remember walking into Beth Israel feeling overwhelmed and anonymous. It was a huge decision to join Beth Israel, leaving my entire family - my father, my sister, Lou Ann, cousins and Aunt and Uncle at Brith Shalom. So I made the decision that the only way to feel part of this huge place was to get involved, meet people, and actively embrace all opportunities to participate.

I quickly joined Sisterhood and two years later, when I was leaving a Sisterhood luncheon, I heard Rabbi Karff - of blessed memory - call out, "Bye Marsha," and that was my sign, - the Rabbi knew my name! I must be home - I was no longer anonymous and really felt a part of this large place for the first time

Judaism had been shaping my life long before I joined Beth Israel. I credit my paternal grandparents, Molly and especially Sam Flanz, with strongly instilling in me the importance of religious observances, family traditions and being an active Jew. My grandfather escaped Europe and came to America in the late 1920's - losing his parents and most family to the Holocaust. In his synagogue, Sam Flanz raised money by at the early Saturday morning minyan he led , bestowing Aliyahs and requiring donations that he personally sent to the congregation in Prague, close to the cemetery where his parents' graves were discovered when I was in college. I credit my grandmother, Molly, for instilling in me my love of cooking and the importance of preparing for the holidays and all the

traditional foods associated with them. She grated potatoes for potato kugel until her knuckles bled, her matzah balls were fluffy, and her gefilte fish was definitely worth fighting over!

My parents, Ruth and Bernard Flanz, both of blessed memories, were equally influential in molding my Judaism. They both led by example – serving as congregational and Sisterhood presidents and leaders of the Conservative movement. They were also instrumental in encouraging transformation within their Conservative congregation where, on my Bat Mitzvah, Rabbi Moshe Cahana bravely made me the first girl who read from the Torah. At the time, I was oblivious to the fact that this was very controversial and did not know until much later in life that my grandfather was not initially supportive.

My Jewish education culminated with a pilgrimage to Israel in 1969 at the same time the U.S. was at war in Viet Nam and the first men landed on the moon. I admit that initially I saw the pilgrimage as my only opportunity to escape Houston for 6 weeks with my parents' approval, but this experience turned out to be life changing. It was first time I was confronted with what courage and determination it took to be a Jew. I saw young people close to my age ready to serve in the army to defend their borders at a time young people in my country were protesting and trying to avoid being drafted. That was powerful!

Stanley and I married in 1973, and even though we came from very divergent Jewish backgrounds – we both took great comfort in the

importance and influence of all the Jewish traditions that both of our parents instilled in us.

My parents died too soon to have a strong personal influence on my children. However, they provided me with a strong Jewish foundation that gave me guidance in raising our wonderful son, Josh, and our precious daughter, Melanie. Thanks to the influence of my sister, Lou Ann, “my artistic muse”, Stanley and I have been able to ensure our family traditions and life cycle events are important and filled with joy and creativity!

Our goal of providing a Jewish home, in every sense, was first tested when we made the decision to move “so far away” to Sugar Land, to start Stanley’s medical practice. We were moving away from a strong Jewish community of friends, family and a congregation we were beginning to feel at home in, to live in a suburb where we knew no one and had 2 small children to raise while building a medical practice. The only thing we were sure about was that we would maintain a close relationship with the temple, no matter what it took or how much we had to sacrifice. It would be our lifeline to our Jewish home and support in providing our children with a strong Jewish identity.

Little did we know at the time, our strongest roots to Jewish life and tradition would result from the family of friends we “adopted” as extended family --- the Schiff’s, Sweeney’s, Hyme’s, Pollicoff, and Chaifetz’s - who also shared our concerns and goals, were members of Beth Israel and have remained the core of our Jewish Sugar Land extended family. I met Pat Pollicoff at Beth Israel where our kids were in the same preschool class

at Shlenker. Jan Schiff and I first crossed paths volunteering with Child Advocates and the Cancer Society in Sugar Land. Our friendship was forever cemented when our sons were on the same losing little league team with two Jewish coaches who knew nothing about turning around a losing team. Jan and I bonded trying to boost the morale with pep talks and spirit pizza parties. – more child advocacy, specifically our own! My first encounter with Sharon Hymes was waiting in a shopping center parking lot at 59 and Murphy Road for the JCC Camp bus to deliver our children. These bonds of friendship were unexpected but welcomed and have continued to grow to this day. Maybe not coincidentally, all of these involved a strong Beth Israel bond!

We carpoled to Beth Israel, even if it meant picking up kids at 2 schools twice weekly, battling 59 traffic and barely getting home in time for dinner. However, I remember these carpool days as being so special, having the kids' captive attention – no cell phones- actual conversations, eavesdropping on the latest school gossip and playing name that tune. Our families quickly bonded, we celebrated religious holidays and secular milestones together until our families multiplied to the point where there were too many to celebrate comfortably under one roof. No problem for us...Our newest tradition is Chanukah and Latkes in the park with all of our grandchildren. Our Sugar Land family now numbers 46 including adults and grandchildren.

Our extended family has included many dear Houston friends as well. Shlenker pre-school was also the meeting place of one of my closest Jewish partners in crime – Jackie Leviton. The distance between Fondren

Southwest and Sugar Land was never a deterrent in our holiday celebrations, BBYO activities, cooking and sharing traditions and celebrations. Jackie was an important lifeline to the Houston Jewish community, keeping me connected, providing moral support and a deep friendship.

This circle of close family friendships that I had grown to love and depend upon was shattered with the untimely deaths of Jackie and Jan within 6 months of each other. They were my rocks and I felt their losses deeply. But, their memories propelled me to draw others even closer and take comfort in the traditions and memories they had helped me create.

When we first moved to Sugar Land, there was no JCC, no Passover supplies, not even a bagel shop! However, these challenges gave me more courage and determination to share my Jewish values and to address prejudice and anti-Semitism.

One unforgettable experience was the time a neighbor's son called to ask if he could interview me on video about Judaism for his Church of Christ school project. I couldn't say no, but what would I say? Would he expect me to recite passages in the bible? This experience caused me much anxiety– I felt I needed to study and choose my words carefully – his parents would be watching. I agreed to participate but no taping and I wanted to know the questions he was going to ask ahead of time so I could prepare and maybe even have the Rabbi check my answers. But thank God I had an “epiphany”...The answer to all of these concerns became clear ...I just needed to communicate that my sense of Judaism and way of

life did not depend on my ability to recite scripture. It is a combination of study and living Jewishly, incorporating our traditions and values into our daily lives.

In preparing for this day, I asked each of my children how they felt my Judaism influenced their lives. Their memories and thoughts sometimes surprised but definitely assured me that my goal of nurturing their Jewish pride has been realized.

Both recalled fondly how we always opened our home and included our non-Jewish neighbors and friends in holiday celebrations – Chanukah, Passover and even Break Fast.

My daughter's best friend, Christine, lived across the street and her parents often bragged that their Christmas tree had more Chanukah than Christmas ornaments. When Chanukah fell during the time Melanie spent winter break in Colorado with them, they made sure she had a menorah, lit the candles, said the blessings and had latkes to eat. Inspired by its symbolism, Christine chose to be married under a handmade Chuppah. To this day, she calls me at Chanukah and Passover for tips while she is making latkes or Matzah balls for her son.

Christmas at elementary school in Sugar Land was always challenging for the few Jewish families. Each year, I made hundreds of latkes for the elementary school staff and my kids' classrooms. For many years, I took dreidels and told the story of Chanukah celebration until I was asked to

stop when anxious parents, hearing their children's excitement about latke tasting and the dreidel game, thought I was trying to convert them!

Despite the challenges, we grew to love our community. Our children learned the importance of mutual respect and took great pride in being Jewish.

Melanie reminded me how special she felt when each year, faced with the assignment to make an ornament for the school Christmas tree, I encouraged her to make a Jewish ornament. By doing this, Melanie recounted that by respecting the assignment, the fact that hers was "Jewish" made her feel special. Josh's memories centered on the importance of our big holiday celebrations and how we were always opening our home to friends, no matter their backgrounds, unaffiliated Jews and even new Beth Israel members with no family or friends to celebrate with. He and Melanie both mentioned the importance of our support of their involvement in BBYO, even if it meant schlepping back and forth to Houston multiple times a day.

I'm grateful that Judaism has become a family affair. I take comfort that Melanie and Josh have both begun to incorporate our Jewish traditions in their lives. Living in New York, far away from family, Melanie created beautiful Seders in her tiny apartment, where she and friends wrote their own haggadah each year with trendy themes such as "The Hunger Games, Passover edition", or "You don't want to Passover this meal". Josh has started leading our family seder and has, with his wife, Andrea, already emphasized the importance of Jewish traditions in their home. It's not

uncommon to walk in to their home and witness our grandson marching with his Beth Israel shofar or strumming his guitar singing Shabbat songs. I feel that our dreams and goals have been realized. We have come full circle.

My parents' and grandparents' examples of leadership and community involvement influenced my belief that the way to truly feel a part of a community is to contribute, dive in, be engaged. This is especially true of my experience at Beth Israel, where I now serve as a Vice-President of the Board. My initial goal of getting involved (some 40 years ago) has led me to serve as President of the Sisterhood, participate on the Beth Israel Endowment Board, chair many events, committees, a clergy search and one of my favorites – hosting go to Shabbats in Sugar Land. I am currently re-organizing our Beth Israel committee structure to welcome you, our congregants into finding meaningful ways to get involved and make a difference for you, your families and ...especially, our congregation. All of these experiences have provided me and my family so much joy and satisfaction, with wonderful, diverse opportunities to practice my Jewish beliefs and strengthen the bonds of friendship I have been so fortunate to have found here.

Stanley frequently jokes that his most significant donation to Beth Israel has been me as a volunteer. But his support behind the scenes has given me strength, encouragement and a sense of great personal fulfillment in our long-ago pledge to create and raise a loving Jewish family. Always a work in progress, but so far, mission accomplished, together!

I only wish my parents had lived long enough to see the fruits of the seeds of Judaism they planted in me. But fortunately, now Stanley and I have the joy of joining Melanie, Josh and our daughter-in-law, Andrea, to introduce our Jewish traditions and pride to our beautiful grandchildren, Noah and Elana.

L'Shanah Tovah!