

## **The Influence of Judaism on My Life: Wayne L. Dorris**

While working on this presentation, I have been very surprised by the many memories that have surfaced and am grateful to Rabbi Lyon for giving me this opportunity for self-reflection. I have realized that Judaism has always been the mainstay of my identity, as a "Boston Jew," providing a solid base of self-assurance and confidence, and as I get older, becoming an even more important part of my daily life.

My grandfather, Morris Dorshitsky, grew up in Sevastopol, Russia. He emigrated, arriving in NYC in 1903. After working as a painter for a few years, he moved to the Boston area, married Esther, also from Russia, and became a Naturalized Citizen in 1918. My father was born in 1914 as one of 6 children; my mother, was born in 1917, also the daughter of Russian emigrants as one of six children. They were married in 1937; my brother was born in 1938; I was born 7 years later on May 7, 1945, the day Germany surrendered. I arrived just in time to celebrate.

I grew up in Dorchester-Mattapan, a mixed ethnicity, lower-income, white working-class neighborhood of Boston, Mass. A few of the families around us were Jewish, all with one primary goal: to fully assimilate as patriotic Americans. In elementary school, we began each day by standing up, putting our right hands over our chest, and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. Since our radio was always on, I remember hearing Boston's Cardinal Cushing reciting the Rosary at 4:15 every weekday afternoon, a reminder of the City's Catholic influence. During Easter, we had colored eggs; during Christmas, the stockings were filled with goodies, in addition to the Jewish holidays. We were part of the melting pot, doing what was necessary to be good Americans. Our Judaism was there, alongside 'motherhood, apple pie, and the flag.'

Intense drama was the best way to describe my family. We lived in a 4-room apartment in a six-family wooden triple-decker. My brother Herb and I shared the back bedroom until he finished his sophomore year at Harvard, when we moved to an

apartment in an adjacent neighborhood with three bedrooms. Herb would do most of his studying sitting in the bathtub, the only quiet area available. My father drove a cleaning truck, delivering dry cleaning to wealthy Jewish families in Brookline and Newton. Dad worked long hours, six days a week, for most of his life. In return, my mother constantly berated him for being 'only' a truckdriver and not showing more ambition. He did not measure up to other men we knew in the Jewish community.

My mother was the product of an alcoholic father and mentally ill mother. At one point she and her five siblings became foster children, no doubt experiencing abuse in the process, until they were able to be reunited under her determined leadership. Evening meals in our house were routinely filled with my mother's wonderful home cooking, coupled with constant bickering about my father's inadequacies, his rotten family (who blamed her for taking their brother away from them), lack of money, in addition to other personal issues. What attention my brother and I did receive was focused on our report cards and household chores. My brother sadly remembers that he was frequently concerned with whether he would even survive, given the pressure on him, as the first-born son, to be successful in school and make my parents proud. (we did that; both turning out to be successful professionals).

I attended the Dorchester-Mattapan Hebrew School and High Holiday services at its adjoining Conservative Temple Beth Hillel. Hebrew school was Sunday mornings, and daily Monday-Thursday, following public school. I walked the half-mile to Hebrew School, frequently reciting The Lord's Prayer when encountering challenging situations along the way. In one class we were learning the Aleph-Bet; in other classes, we studied the Chumash and Jewish rituals with teaching staff, many of whom were Holocaust survivors, with heavy European accents, speaking in broken English and Hebrew. I never really understood what they were saying. We would routinely go into the chapel and synagogue auditorium for lessons, with a heavy emphasis on proper

decorum: sit up straight, don't cross your legs, don't talk. After six years, I learned the basics: how to read Hebrew and recite the prayers; that everything written in the Torah had different interpretations; and that the Sabbath was the most important of all Jewish Holy Days.

The experiences and learnings I had at Hebrew School did not seem to apply to my home life. Friday night was characterized by bickering around the dinner table while trying to enjoy my mother's cooking. Saturday was a regular workday, highlighted by special TV programs. When it came time for the High Holiday services at our Synagogue, we sat where we could afford, in the balcony. Two main activities stand out as disturbing: first, the exodus from the temple during the Torah Reading. That was the time for the men to go outside and smoke, kibbutz, and watch the kids run around. Second, the fund raising: each family received a card with our name on it, with different dollar figures around the perimeter, one of which we had to choose as our donation. It seemed that this was the opportunity for the Board of Directors to make their plea from the bimah, one by one, and cajole the members for support. Evidently, the best way to show how Jewish we were was by the amount we gave to the Temple. Even more discouraging, the most frequent sermon topic was an admonishment from the Rabbi for being 'just' high holiday Jews, and not taking the Sabbath seriously. On the other hand, the Choir, organ music, and Cantor chanting the prayers were beautiful and forever embedded in my memory. To this day, the music at Beth Israel brings me back to these early years and reaches to the core of who I am and the continuity of my life.

The primary avenue for Jewish kids in Boston to advance and move up the economic scale was through Boston Latin School, a college preparatory public exam high school. My mother insisted that we go to this all-male central school where a sports coat, white shirt and tie constituted the school uniform. I followed my brother there for grades 7 – 12. My father drove us there every day over a 10-year period on his way to

work. There was never any doubt in our family that we would become professionals and bring honor to both our parents and the entire Jewish Community. Being Jewish meant being academically successful!

While at Latin School, I attended Hebrew High School for three years, until the end of my Junior year. These Jewish studies added to my religious interest and curiosity, and not necessarily to a deeper understanding of Judaism as a way of life. Given that we could not afford Jewish summer camp or a trip to Israel, that we did not have a Kosher home or regularly observe the Sabbath, or live in a predominantly Jewish community, I always had an inner conflict about what it really meant to be Jewish.

Sometime during my early years in high school, my brother began attending the Unitarian Church in Downtown Boston on Sunday mornings. He invited me to join him on one occasion. This turned out to be a turning point in my religious life. The 30-minute sermon seemed directed at me; I felt that here was a religious leader who truly understood what I, as a teenager, was experiencing. The readings were from American Literature and the hymns had lyrics that made sense. The service was an hour long; I was enthusiastically greeted by members of the welcoming committee, who expressed interest in me and my next visit. From then on, I became a regular visitor, even after my brother lost interest. I had a place to express my religiosity at a time I needed it most. And I could still identify as Jewish, without adopting any uniquely Christian beliefs.

In 1971, the Viet Nam War was still raging. Having delayed the draft for as long as I could, I was faced with either going into the military or 3 years in jail. With my master's degree in Social Work in hand, I entered USAF Basic Training in San Antonio, Texas for six weeks. It was a totally miserable experience! Two significant factors made it tolerable. The Jewish Community Center of San Antonio picked up all the Jewish Basic Trainees every Sunday morning for a bagels and lox breakfast. I felt I was

being rescued and brought into the hands of civilization, even if it was only for 3 hours. People there appreciated my background and showed interest in what I was doing. I truly valued being Jewish and lived for these Sunday morning opportunities.

The other mitigating factor was my master's degree. Because of it, I was commissioned a Social Work Officer and subsequently remained in the USAF for the next 14 years serving in a variety of mental health clinics and programs. The best of my assignments was a 3-year stint at Brandeis University to earn my Ph.D. in Social Policy. Once again, I was back in a Jewish environment and enjoying every minute of it.

My first wife was a fellow Domestic Peace Corps volunteer and Unitarian. We met when I was 20 and married at age 22. The ceremony consisted primarily of poems and excerpts from English literature. Five years later, we had two children who received their religious education at Unitarian Sunday Schools. Their contacts with Judaism were during the Jewish programs I led and periodically with my parents during Passover seders. The emphasis in our house was on living a principled life, accepting all religions as equally valued and important.

My first marriage ended after 20 years. The initial differences in our upbringing grew wider as we developed into mature adulthood. The divorce gave me space to look more objectively at myself and my identity. Trying to escape from an unhappy childhood by rejecting my parent's lifestyle and the Judaism which they represented no longer worked. As much as I enjoyed the Unitarian philosophy and its humanistic approach to life, it did not connect with the inner core of who I was. There was a discontinuity which I needed to overcome.

When I met Jacqui, I was surprised by how comfortable the relationship was from the very beginning. Just as I felt at home when I first landed in Israel a few years later, I had no trouble relating to her values and priorities. We shared a common heritage, a common language and sense of humor, both being brought up by Ashkenazi Jewish

parents in the Northeast; we enjoyed Jewish cooking and regular religious rituals. We each were previously married with two children similar in age and education. It was a good fit; we have now been married 30 years, second time around.

One of our first activities together was with a Chavurah group from Congregation Beth Yeshurun, led by Rabbi Ernesto Yattah. We met once a month and discussed all aspects of Jewish life. I began working with him with the Temple's single's group and day school. Jacqui and I also attended the "alternative" Family Sabbath Service in Beth Yeshurun's meeting hall; it was a completely musical service which 'brought me back' to the rituals and hymns of my upbringing. So here I was, attending a monthly Jewish study group with Jacqui, working together with the Rabbi, getting involved in synagogue programs, and enjoying Sabbath services: **this was not the Judaism that I grew up in and found confusing!**

At this same time, I was working with the Board of the Mental Health Association, where I met Rabbi David Lyon who was volunteering there as part of his first Rabbinical assignment. While getting to know Rabbi Lyon (whom we have now known for more than 30 years), and subsequently attending High Holiday services at Congregation Beth Israel, I realized that Reform Judaism provided a religious, spiritual, and philosophical home where beliefs and actions were in alignment. The services were meaningful and challenging; Rabbi Karff was extraordinary in his ability to communicate empathy and understanding and talk directly to you from the bimah. Rabbi David Kaplan, Beth Israel's Associate Rabbi, performed our marriage ceremony.

We have travelled to Israel on three occasions. Touring Israel was a magical experience, in that I felt at home as soon as we landed in Tel Aviv. As we visited different historical sites, I frequently thought that if I had these experiences during my high school years, my life decisions might have been very different.

There were consequences for bringing my children up in a humanistic religious tradition. They are both loving, caring, successful people; they married very caring, equally successful non-Jews. They have nice homes and happy children. But, not-surprisingly, they are not bringing their children up Jewish. As I was raising them, I emphasized humanism, leaving out Judaism. At the time, I did not realize the significance of my Jewish background and upbringing and did not anticipate the absence of events like the Bris or Bar Mitzvah for grandchildren. It is a regret of my own making that I have to live with.

What I have realized is that throughout my life, I have always been influenced by my Jewish upbringing. There were many twists and turns. Yet, I eventually came home to what was always inside me. Attending High Holiday Services at Beth Israel has provided a deep spiritual and emotional experience from the first blowing of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah to the final Shofar chorus at the end of the Yom Kippur Memorial Service. We love sponsoring the Musical Shabbat Services. Actively participating in the Beth Israel Book Club is expanding my horizons with a variety of Jewish literature. Regularly attending Melton Courses at the ERJCC has helped me see Judaism as a vibrant religion affecting all aspects of my life. 'If I only learned this when I was in Hebrew School!' I have realized that being Jewish is more than a spiritual or religious identity; it is more than a cultural identity. It is a way of life expressed in every aspect of our being, transcending all else. It is reflected in all our actions, in who we are.

Thank you and L'Shana Tovah.