

Shabbat Shalom and Happy International Women's Day.

Reconstructionist Judaism was the primary influence on my early life. My parents had both been raised in Orthodox homes, where Jewish observance and awareness characterized the whole of life. They grew up in a world which was entirely Jewish in family and social life.

When my mother was 12, in 1922, an older cousin took her along one Shabbat to hear the new and controversial rabbi, Mordecai Kaplan. My grandfather did not object, because he believed his children should be free to explore new ideas - as long as they were Jewish ideas.

My mother was very impressed by the approach Kaplan took: his radical introduction of the Bat Mitzvah and his dismissal of the same things in Judaism that bothered her. These included what she saw as the naive and outworn tribal notion of Jews as God's chosen people, and the miracles and sacrifices in the traditional prayers.

When she and my father met, fewer than 10 years later, he was also drawn to this new school of thought that allowed him to bring his thinking self and his observant self into some degree of harmony. They joined Kaplan's congregation, the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, and were deeply involved for many years. My father was often on the Board and other committees, serving as president of the congregation and in many other offices, and my mother was a faithful member of The Women's Division of the synagogue. In later years, they were among the founders of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College which nurtured the talents of our own rabbis, Boris Dolin and Maurice Harris, as well as Yohanna Kinberg, daughter of TBI's galvanizing rabbi of the 70's, 80's, and early '90's, Myron Kinberg of blessed memory.

On my Bat Mitzvah day in February of 1959, my maternal grandfather sat next to me. Grandpa was a pious Orthodox Jew who davened at all the prescribed times, loving and respecting the traditional liturgy, He leaned

over and whispered to me, “Joanie, how do you say the Bracha here?” He was referring to the blessing recited before the reading of the Torah, which traditionally includes a reference to Jews as the chosen people. I whispered back the alternative formula used by Reconstructionists - and included to this day in our prayerbook. And that is the blessing he used.

Even at that young age, I was struck by his gracious flexibility, and I later learned that he was honoring the Jewish principle of Minhag ha Makom - respecting the custom of the place where you find yourself. This speaks volumes to me of the humility, respectfulness and decency of this lovely, gentle 79 year old man who had grown up in the harshest poverty and struggle of New York’s Lower East Side.

Eight years earlier, at my elder brother Rob’s Bar Mitzvah in January of 1951, when, at the age of 4 1/2, I was likely attending my first adult Shabbat service. I was very curious about everything, and you know that a 4 year old’s most common word is ‘why.’ I was looking around the sanctuary and asking my mother an endless stream of questions. - What are those funny hats? Why are only the men wearing them? What are those things on their shoulders? Why only the men? What is Grandpa, Daddy, my uncle doing up there? (an aliyah) Why only the men?

For years, the ideological leaders of the congregation had sought to extend full participation in the service to women. There was Bat Mitzvah, but after that, women were not seen on the Bimah. Several times over 3 decades the issue had come up for a congregational vote and always been defeated. My mother was one of the opponents, mainly I think due to her discomfort at the thought of forcing herself into unfamiliar behaviors. But the experience at her first son’s Bar Mitzvah, the realization that she would have to tell her daughter she was a second class citizen, caused her to re-think. She apparently spoke out very movingly on the issue at the next congregational meeting, and the measure passed.

I started Hebrew school at the SAJ in first grade and went 3 times a week. In addition to learning Hebrew, history, holidays and Israel related subjects, there were amazing regularly scheduled arts opportunities as well. A wonderful Israeli dance teacher taught us numerous folks dances, and when we were older she choreographed dramatic dance performances that put stories from Torah and Jewish history into our bodies and made them real. I also remember our class working as a group to create a tile mosaic representing the ancient Temple. There was a spectacular woman choral director and composer who met with us regularly to teach us songs, and who found ways to include children's singing in programs for holidays and special events.

Later on, by maybe 6th grade, in addition to reading Tanach, we began reading modern Israeli poetry - Bialik, whom we studied deeply, stands out. In the B'nai Mitzvah year, the rabbi led a required class for students and their parents every Sunday morning for the entire academic year, regardless of the timing of one's particular ceremony. This class covered Jewish and wider topics, including issues of puberty and adolescence. The result was the integration of our Jewish learning and our lives.

A word here about our Cantor, Moshe Nathanson. He was the composer of much beautiful liturgical music still in use today and sung widely, even outside the Reconstructionist movement, and here at TBI. He taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary and influenced a generation of Jewish music. He was born in Jerusalem, spoke fluent Sephardi Hebrew, and filled our congregation with music richly Jewish in its sound and also new and alive. It was a pleasure to go up to his office once a week to work on my Bat Mitzvah, where his corrections of cantillation were produced on the piano, and his corrections of Hebrew were delivered with a twinkle. He taught me unconventional tropes for Torah and Haftarah, and I enjoyed learning them. Thanks to his encouragement, I also got a chance to chant the Megilla for Purim and haftarot for special occasions.

Meanwhile, there was the rest of my education. Throughout my schooling, I was privileged to attend private progressive schools where the curriculum mirrored the values I was learning at home and in Hebrew School. From 4th grade through high school, I attended the Ethical Culture Schools, known for their excellent academic preparation, but also for their emphasis on values. Every week of every year, we had a required Ethics class where age-appropriate issues were discussed and debated.

In 1958, my parents celebrated their 25th anniversary with a trip to Europe and their first visit to Israel, then just 10 years old, and they brought me along. I was just 12 at the time, about to start 7th grade and preparations for my Bat Mitzvah. I was at the age when Catholic girls think about becoming nuns, and I was in love with God and with Israel. I was also young enough that I was still in love with my parents, and so the long trip was largely harmonious and one of the happiest times in my childhood.

We met my father's first cousin who in 1920 had exchanged his ticket to New York for one to Palestine, and who was an idealistic socialist Zionist. He and his wife had to be idealistic, as the family's poverty and their spartan life was striking to me, especially in contrast to the expansiveness of my own life, including the resources to travel to visit them. The three sabra daughters amazed me, especially the oldest who was at the time in the army, and looked like my ideal in her uniform. My loving relationships with these cousins have continued and grown with the birth of new generations.

And now full disclosure: In spite of close connections to Judaism all my early life, in my 20's I began to draw away. Maybe it was the hothouse effect of a uniform world of values and culture, maybe it was something about the times, but I needed to explore. My life had been so fully Jewish that I found my gentile friends and their ways of being exotic and fascinating. I also began to explore spirituality in new avenues - yoga, meditation,

vegetarianism, astrology and mysticism, and I created grass roots secular rituals. I was widening my context.

I moved to England in 1970 to study in a school of the western mystery tradition and further expanded my world view. I met new people who opened parts of me that had lain dormant, and I experienced new ways of understanding and living. I began a spiritual practice that is with me to this day. I became a feminist and an environmentalist. I married a gentile atheist, and we had a son. And I avoided Jews. I knew always who I was and what was at my core, but I was doing an internship on the rest of the world.

Through the confluence of accident and opportunity - and as the Beatles say, with a little help from my friends - my husband, our son and I moved from England to Eugene in July of 1979. And then the existing forms began to break apart. The marriage ended, and I began to meet Jews - wonderful and appealing Jews. I found a comfort and social ease that I hadn't realized I had been missing.

After a year or so of observing the ubiquitous Rabbi Kinberg from afar, I walked over to TBI to join the congregation and sign up my 7 year-old son for what we used to call Religious School. Myron was incredible: he stopped - I think he had been on his way home for lunch - and he sat down with me in his office and conversed and interviewed me at length. He was thrilled to talk about Reconstructionism, at that time virtually unknown in Eugene, and he immediately got his recruiter's uniform on. Would I be the director of the Religious School? The Youth Group leader? I did not feel quite up to those expectations, but Myron did not give up.

When he asked me if I would be willing to chant the haftarah at a Shabbat service, I agreed, though it had been 15-20 years since I had done one. But the things you learn early often stick, and with a lot of hours

of preparation, I found I was able to pull it off. I also found a little community in the Shabbat morning minyan - at that time a participating woman was unusual, but fortunately it was also permitted. Myron got an enormous amount of pleasure through helping others to do mitzvot. One minyan member loved to daven, in spite of not having been born with a musical voice. He brayed and squawked - but with tremendous kavana - Myron beamed and murmured "Beautiful" every time.

TBI was a relatively small congregation in the early '80's and Myron knew how to make the most of it. He knew every member - what their talents and struggles were, what they liked to do - and he found ways to include them and plug them in to what was at the time a one-man show. I benefitted enormously from this, as my working knowledge of Hebrew and some liturgy, and my other skills resulted in my rabbi offering me more and more opportunities to do mitzvot by leading and teaching.

After a few years, Yitzhak Husbands-Hankin was hired as our Cantor. This was a stellar situation for the congregation: Myron's strong, progressive and generous leadership and Yitz's beautiful voice and marvelous music - rich with traditional tunes, the appropriate music for every observance, and the emerging Jewish Renewal music of the day, including his own compositions. It was during this blessed time of their working in tandem that Irwin and I were privileged to be married at TBI. Of course, our wedding was the most beautiful in the world (and I hope everybody who has been married feels this way) and much of that came from the two men who poured love and wisdom and beauty into the ritual and into us. During our honeymoon, in between my dreams, I heard Yitz's voice singing his exquisite tune for the seven wedding blessings. The blessings and the beauty of the music stayed with me in my heart and mind, and though fainter they live in me to this day.

Myron and Yitzhak, this dynamic duo, offered me a perfect learning environment. I like to say that Myron gave me the opportunities, and Yitz gave me the skills. Over time, Myron invited me to serve as his Cantor at weddings when Yitz was away. He gave me a copy of his Rabbi's Manual so that I could do a funeral or unveiling when needed. The next step came when Libby Bottero invited me to perform the wedding of her son Asher and his lovely bride, Harumi. I remember asking her, "By myself?" Her confidence in me, plus all the teaching from Myron and Yitzhak, allowed me to take off in a new - and delightful - direction. One of the great satisfactions of my life is the opportunity to serve people at points of high emotion - their weddings, baby namings, B'nai Mitzvah, and in their times of loss.

For many years, TBI also gave me a paid job. Thank you, Gary Tepfer, and later Sheldon Rubin, for believing in me. I had a variety of responsibilities, working in the office, writing parts of the newsletter, teaching meditation to our high school students, and ultimately, in a particularly difficult period for TBI, stepping in to serve as Pastoral Assistant for 2 years.

When Myron left, it was painful, but understandable. There were many good reasons for him to leave this community he had built over 17 years and seek a more prestigious post in the wider Jewish world. I got to visit with him only once in New York, in the hospital after his first pair of heart attacks. But he phoned often, and we kept in touch. His shocking early death was intolerable, and my heart still rebels against it. One of the mysteries of loss and mourning is that the loved one is internalized and present for ever. Having been blessed to be connected to Myron, knowing him as my rabbi, friend and guide, he is constantly with me in my awareness and in my prayers.

The culmination of all this learning and increasing autonomy came, after leading a Shabbat service while on vacation on Kauai, when I was invited to return to lead their High Holy Day services. Irwin calls this my MFA summer, as I crammed the language of the liturgy, worked with tapes Yitz

made for me of the special holiday music, and wrote the required four sermons. I sat outside in our sunny garden for several hours each day, getting a great tan and getting it together through concentration and sweat. I am so grateful for that opportunity, and for the exquisite and authentic High Holy Day melodies that Yitz carries and was willing to impart to me, and by extension to the Jewish community of Kauai where I led High Holy Day services for two years.

In recent years, due to the gravitas that accompanies grey hair and advancing age, I have moved into a mentor role in this congregation. I love working with B'nai Mitzvah families as the Bubbe without Baggage, as a teacher in the Community Education program, and with a group for women, Come Under the Wings, that started last fall.

In conclusion, there is nothing to say but Thank You. I offer my thanks to God for the miraculous gift of life; to my parents and grandparents for the riches of Judaism that they treasured and transmitted to me; to the visionary and courageous founders and builders of Reconstructionism for breaking down so many barriers - opening the door to women and to Gays and Lesbians, and the whole Queer tent - in congregations, in life cycle rituals and in the rabbinate, leading the way for other movements to follow at their own pace. I am grateful to all my teachers - in Hebrew School, in secular school, in the universities, in my spiritual explorations, and in that most intimate of learning environments, the family, where Irwin, my incomparable, wise and loving husband, has been a deep and patient teacher, and to our remarkable children, Dagan and Jacqueline - my most challenging teachers - whose lives have given me the opportunity to walk my talk.

Finally, I thank the community of Temple Beth Israel and its gifted rabbis for welcoming me, nurturing me, and allowing me to flourish here.

Again, happy International Women's Day and Shabbat Shalom.