

When I was first invited by Rabbi Itz to speak tonight on a topic called “this American Jewish life” I was wondering if he made a mistake. I am not what you would consider a devoted member of the Jewish faith. I am a member in good standing (as far as I know) with this particular congregation, but I don’t make frequent appearances for services and dare I confess, violate many of the 613 mitzvot regularly. In fact, my wife Teresa who converted to Judaism some 20 years ago makes a better Jew than I. So I’m a bad Jew and Rabbi Itz made a mistake in inviting me to speak tonight. So I thought. But you know Rabbi Itz, he doesn’t let you get off that easy. He assured me I would not be booed or judged, ok he didn’t assure of that, but please don’t boo me or judge me.

So what is my American Jewish life story?

Forty two years ago I was born in Rishon LeZion, Israel. Rishon is a about half the size of Eugene and has a population of about 230,000 people.

When I was 10 ½ years old my parents decided to immigrate to the US. I am often asked about this decision, people wanting to know what drove or maybe provoked that decision. The truth is I don’t think there is a single answer that would completely answer this question. Over the years I have come to realize there were many reasons for their decision – better educational opportunities for me and my brothers and therefore better prospects for employment, with the Israeli-Lebanon in the background, the reality of me and my three brothers serving in the Israeli army became a more palpable and alarming prospect in my mother’s eyes. Israel had changed a great deal by this time and the patriotic enthusiasm of the pioneers was vastly fading. Sending young Jewish boys to war in 56, 67 and 73 was by many considered an honor, a mitzvah. The 1982 war did not espouse the same zeal, not in the eyes of many Israelis and not in the eyes of my parents. This, coupled with a variety of other interconnected reasons led my parents to move their young family to the friendly city of angles.

So, in April of 1982, after a long flight we arrived in America. We flew into to Tom Bradley international airport. I had never seen anything of that magnitude. I remember thinking the entire city I grew up in could fit in the airport. Getting out of the airport and onto the LA freeways only increased my fascination and youthful excitement. I knew America would be my new place of residence, but I was certain Israel would always be my home and Hebrew would always be my native language. My, how time changes everything.

My first few years in America were filled with the glee similar to what a little boy experiences on his first trip to Disneyland and the terror of realizing he just got in line for one of those terrifying, scream provoking rollercoasters. There were so many amazing new experiences this country had to offer, and Saturday morning cartoons were on top of that list. Every new store, new park, neighborhood new fast food restaurant was a delightful discovery. I loved roaming the neighborhood near where I lived. The area of Fairfax and Beverly Blvd was a prominent Jewish neighborhood filled with Jewish stores, bakeries and eateries. There were many Temples around and a strong Jewish/Israeli presence.

A few days after we arrived in the US my mom decided to ruin my life and register us in school. This was in clear violation of my right to watch cartoons all day and explore the local neighborhood with my imaginary friends I protested. But she would have none of it. We had to go to school.

John Hancock Elementary School was about a mile and ½ from our apartment and my mom would walk us to school every morning and pick us up in the afternoon. Since it was the end of April I only had to endure a couple of months of the 5th grade. I remember being there with my mom when she registered us. She told the administrator my name was Itzik and they wanted to know if I wanted to be called a different name. Since I didn’t speak a word of English, my mom translated this question and asked if I wanted to be called a different name. I was confounded. Why on earth would I want to be called by a different name? I thought to myself. That’s an odd question to ask. “No”, I answered somewhat perplexed. (If I only knew then what I know now...) Don’t get me wrong, I’m proud of my name and being named after my great grandfather, but if I had known it would break the teeth of everyone who

first tried to pronounce it, I might have elected to add a “middle” name or simple change it to Isaac (the English translation of the name)

But I didn’t know Itzik was such a foreign name to 99.9% of all Americans. It was fairly common where I came from. Who knew?

I couldn’t tell you much about my experience in the fifth grade. Watching cartoons at home and not understanding what was said is one thing. But being in a strange school, a foreign class, all speaking in a foreign language was quite another. There is no language barrier to understanding what happens in a Tom and Jerry episode. There is a huge language barrier when a teacher tries to explain an assignment to you and you can’t understand a single word she is uttering. I remember the kids around me frequently laughing when the teacher spoke to me. Or maybe it was my attempt at formulating a response to a question I couldn’t possibly understand that inspired their giggling. In any event, I soon discovered that doodling on my paper and keeping my head down was the better way to pass time. During the next several years my English had improved and school was no longer such an intimidating place. I slowly began making friends, improving my language skills, and respectively my grades. During those years I also discovered, however, that English was not the only thing I had to learn. America was NOT a Jewish state. In fact, I began to realize, Jews were a minority here. This was very confusing for a kid who wasn’t exposed to anything other than Jews and Jewish culture and traditions. Certainly there was some diversity in Israel when I was growing up, but it was minimal. For the most part everyone around me was Jewish, celebrating the same holidays, speaking the same language, exhibiting the same Israeli in-your-face mannerisms. My teachers were Jewish, my coaches were Jewish, the landscape guy was Jewish, the garbage man was Jewish, the mailman was Jewish. Generally, everyone was Jewish. I didn’t know anything other than the Jewish way. Well, the secular Jewish way.

But here, in America, I slowly discovered, being Jewish, meant being different, being the exception to the norm. Sure, most people (especially in LA) were generally familiar with Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Pesach, and Hanukah, but that was really about it. What about Sukkot, Purim, Lag Ba’omer. Here’s the thing. As a kid growing up in Israel, these Holidays are treasured, a wonderful exciting gift waiting to be unwrapped. On Purim all of us kids would go to school dressed up in costumes and the entire school day was transformed into a festive fun-filled day with activities, custom parades, and games. On Lag Ba’omer kids and grownups alike would make these huge neighborhood bon fires where we would all gather and sing songs, play games, roast potatoes, and often burn the effigy of Hitler. For us young ones, this was one awesome party.

And Sukkot, oh my, now that’s a holiday fashioned by the hand of the Almighty for the benefit and enjoyment of Israeli kids everywhere. In Israel, land, as many of you know is limited. So most people reside not in private residence; but in multi-level apartment complexes. Often the residents of the complex would all pitch in to build a sizeable sukkah for us kids. For the next 7 days, most of the kids in the building would practically live in the sukkah. We would eat there, play games, share stories, make decorations, and cherish the camp like experience; and of course the fact that school was out. But probably one of my favorite holiday as a pre-teen was Yom Kippur. I realize this may be a bit odd to say; but let me explain. On Yom Kippur, the adults go to services, fast, atone for their sins, and generally are not the most pleasant people to be around. But for the kids, this is a whole other kind of holy day. You know how God parted the red sea so the Israelites could cross as they were pursued by the Egyptians. Well, that miracle repeated itself in every street and every highway across the land of Israel during Yom Kippur. The difference was that instead of parting the sea, God parted roads. You see, with the exception of emergency vehicles there was absolutely no vehicular traffic on any road. It meant that us kids would take our bikes, our roller skates, our scooters, our skateboards, and head out the streets, highways and freeways. We would ride from one city to the next in droves. It was truly an extraordinary day for all us kids.

There were many other differences I began to recognize as I slowly assimilated to this country. Some things like Chinese food, Magic Mountain, Universal Studios, getting free candy from strangers during Halloween and having multiple channels on TV were changes for the better, in my humble view. Other differences required some adjusting to. Being a Jew in a Christian country required some learning on my part. To be honest, before I came to the states I didn't even know who Jesus was, which was confusing because I kept hearing he was everywhere. Christmas was all around me, but a mystery. What's with the tree I wondered? And Easter? Why were kids so excited about a bunny and colorful eggs I mused? With time I learned all about these new holidays and traditions and began to appreciate the joy and happiness they brought. Although my family does not celebrate Christmas, it has become one of my favorite time of the year. I love the spirit of joy and community it engenders. It's exactly how I felt as a young boy standing around the bon fire at Lag ba'omer, waking up in the sukkah, or showing off my cool custom to my friends during Purim.

Today, I have fully assimilated to the American way of life. I know that for a fact because three years ago when my family and I went back to Israel for a visit, I realized I was no longer an "Israeli". I was struggling to converse in Hebrew, I found the people generally rude and confrontational, the heat was overbearing, the concept of personal space was non-existent and regularly violated, I felt that everywhere I turned someone was trying to take advantage of "us" Americans, and all this before we even left the airport terminal. Ok, I'm exaggerating, but those of you who have been to Israel know there is more than a hint of truth in that description.

So does this mean I am a fully vested American? I don't think so. My name and accent give away my heritage, so I couldn't escape my past even if I wanted to; and I DON'T want to. In fact, I think my life has been enriched by my experiences both here and in Israel. I strongly identify with my Jewish legacy because of my unique history. In that same vein I think every Jewish kid should experience the Jewish holidays in Israel. Frankly, there is no substitute to that experience.

I am not a religious person by nature. As I said earlier, I rarely go to services or keep most of the Jewish laws. There was a time twenty one years ago before Teresa and I were married that I was fully immersed in Judaism. Teresa, who was Catholic by birth, was always drawn to the Jewish culture, tradition and religion. When we decided to get married we also decided she would convert to Judaism. My secular Israeli parents insisted it be an Orthodox conversion and we agreed, or rather acquiesced. As it turned out, it was a remarkable, enlightening and spiritual experience for us both. Spending a year dedicated to an Orthodox congregation, going to shul every weekend, receiving weekly tutelage from the Rabbi's wife about Jewish laws, holidays, and traditions, and becoming proficient in davening, was a transcending experience enriching the core of my soul and I am a better human being for it. But it also made me realize, that at least for now, it is not a path I can sustain.

So who, or what am I today? I am an Israeli American Jew. I have an indelible, deep rooted appreciation for my culture and tradition. I am proud to be Jewish, to have been born and raised in Israel, and to have made a home here in America. Thank you for listening, Shabbat Shalom.