

My American Jewish Life (1965 - 2015) – 24 April 2015 – Shabbat Shalom friends.

I did not grow up Jewish. My parents (Philip Royce and Harriet Howard Royce) were both from Hammond, Indiana. My dad was an Army officer among other interests, so we moved frequently and our family of five kids enjoyed seeing new places and meeting new people. After the Presidio post, we settled in San Rafael, California. My dad was a liberal Episcopalian (“low-church”) who thought of Jesus as one of the first Reform rabbis, and he taught various classes at his Church. My mom was raised Presbyterian but she became a Catholic during the time of Liberation Theology in the Church; she and I read Thomas Merton and Teilhard de Chardin together, and she was among those liberal Catholics who hoped that Pope John XXIII (“the good pope”) was going to allow women to become priests, and priests to marry. My parents were open-minded and intellectually curious and allowed us to explore our own spiritual paths. I visited various churches growing up, but none of them felt like the right place for me, so I left it up to God, the Universe, to let me know.

In 1965 when I was 18 years old, I attended College of Marin north of San Francisco, and in a philosophy class there, I met Charles Benjamin Yaffee. One thing led to another, and within a few weeks, we had eloped to Reno, and a couple years later our son Asher Benjamin Royce Yaffee was born. Both sets of our parents (who were older and wiser than we were in the ways of the world) predicted correctly that the marriage would not last. However, meeting the extended Yaffee family was a wonderful introduction to Jewish life for me, and I am still close to many of the Yaffees.

I converted to Judaism while Charles and I were temporarily living in Seattle. One Friday night we came across Congregation Herzl-Ner Tamid in Seattle, which was a combined Conservative/Traditional synagogue, and I felt a spiritual connection there. The Rabbi, Maurice Corson, gave me many interesting books to read: A.J. Heschel, Martin Buber, Jacob Neusner, Leo Baeck, Bernard Bamberger, Morris Adler, Nahum Glatzer, Sam Cohon, Milton Steinberg, and others, in addition to TaNaK of course, and we had many interesting discussions about Judaism. When I was 8 months pregnant, Rabbi Corson arranged for a beit din, my first mikveh immersion, a ketubah for us, and he married us under the chuppah at the synagogue – all in the same afternoon! The next month we had a Pesach seder at our home, and a few days later Asher was born; he had a brit milah and pidyon ha-ben. But after a few months, Charles realized that he was not yet ready for the responsibilities of work and family, so he left to find himself; he eventually became a Chabad Lubavitch rabbi, remarried and had 9 more kids in Crown Heights but that's another story...Rabbi Corson went on to work at the Wexner Institute.

Once I had “officially” joined the Jewish tribe, I began to visit a range of synagogues – from Orthodox to Reform, Ashkenazic to Sephardic, Chasidic to Humanist – in order to learn more about Judaism.

In 1968 Asher & I moved back to SF and lived at the House of Love and Prayer, founded by Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, of blessed memory. It was that glorious time in San Francisco of free love & free speech, psychedelics & Holy Man Jams in Golden Gate Park, anti-war protests & the Aquarian Minyan in Berkeley. The House was known as the “Jewish hippie commune” in SF; it was both Shomer Shabbat and a source of certain mind-altering substances (you know that Shlomo song “Lord get me high” was from that era). That's where I met Rabbi Aryae Hirschfield, and Reb Zalman Schachter Shalomi, both of blessed memory, and my good friend Elana Rappaport. Many of us who lived at the House during that time have remained life-long friends, despite the different paths our lives have taken since then.

I also tried living in traditional communities in Brooklyn and Winnipeg, and decided that if I wanted to get married again, I was going to need a get (halachic divorce document). Since I had a ketubah, I had the status of an agunah (literally “tied/chained” to an absent spouse) according to halachah. So Asher & I travelled to Israel to find Charles (then using his Hebrew name: Yechezkel Benzion Yaffee) but he was advised by the ultra-orthodox rabbi at the yeshiva he attended *not* to give me the get I requested. As you may know, many agunot are in limbo until they can come up with the financial demands to purchase their freedom; it's an unjust but halachically justified form of extortion.

Fortunately for me, my father and my father-in-law together came up with the money and in 1971 I finally received my get at the beit din in Jerusalem. *That day at the beit din was a transformative experience for me, just as the mikveh was a transformative experience for me.* Afterwards, I walked back to my little room in Meah Shearim, lit a candle, wrote out a get in my own words, and gave it to Yechezkel. *It was my first act as a Jewish feminist, my “orange on the seder plate.”* I knew at that moment that I could no longer live in an orthodox community because I saw that justice was not available there for women and children. I realized that I needed to find a Jewish home where halachah was not stuck in the past, but was a living breathing path of current Jewish practice – as R. Mordechai Kaplan said, “Halachah has a vote, not a veto.” I'm *thrilled* that just this week, Women of the Wall celebrated with Sefer Torah at the Kotel!

After living in Israel, I returned to SF, went back to college, and on to nursing school so I could make a living. In 1977 Asher and I moved to Corvallis, Oregon where we had relatives. I worked as a nurse at Good Sam Hospital in Corvallis, and we joined Beit Am Jewish Community. We also joined Temple Beth Israel in Eugene when Asher was in middle school so he could study at TBI TT for his bar mitzvah. We got to know Rabbi Myron Kinberg, of blessed memory, and his wife Alice Haya Kinberg; Yitz was the TBI Cantor then. One Shabbat morning Myron called me up for an aliyah, and another time to take the Torah out of the Ark – so for the first time in my life as a Jewish woman, *I counted in the minyan – I had found my Jewish home.* Asher had his bar mitzvah at TBI in 1982, which many Yaffee relatives attended, *a joyous occasion!*

Meanwhile in Corvallis, I met my beloved partner, Joseph Moshe Bottero, a research scientist at OSU's College of Oceanography, and also a convert to Judaism, and we were married at TBI in 1985. R. Myron officiated under the chuppah, R. Yitz sang his lovely melodies, R. Hanan told the story of the "7 Beggars" for the sheva brachot, Joan Bayliss accompanied us for the circling, Shonna made the ketubah, and dance music was provided by the incomparable Rich Glauber and Avi Sills. Joseph and I then spent a couple of months living in Israel. We also took many of R. Myron's classes together including: Biblical & Modern Hebrew, Jewish History, Israel & Zionism, Mussar (Myron wrote his thesis on mussar), Kabbalah, Jewish ethics & philosophy, Jewish holidays & life cycle events, and an online Talmud class from Rabbi Judith Z. Abrams, of blessed memory. I also learned a lot from Alice Kinberg, an inspiring and empowering lay rabbi who taught classes at TBI about Jewish feminism & spirituality, and Sephardic culture. Myron and Alice together worked hard to make sure TBI was a welcoming and inclusive community for interfaith families and GLBT members; they worked on issues of social justice and human rights with Rev. Dan Bryant, and Middle East peace panels with our mutual friend Ibrahim Hamide. *The Kinbergs' examples of principled right action, of integrity and moral leadership, were courageous at a time when these were not popular positions.*

After the Kinbergs moved to New York in 1994, Yitz became the next TBI rabbi. He continued TBI's focus on social justice and environmental issues (e.g. tikkun olam and eco-kashrut), and he introduced deep & beautiful music to our services. Yitz & Shonna both brought creative ideas, art, and practices from the Jewish Renewal movement and kallahs to TBI, and shared the teachings of Reb Shlomo and Reb Zalman. May they be blessed with good health and good times in their upcoming retirement.

Other TBI rabbis and teachers have contributed much to TBI since I've been here – guest teachers such as Rabbi Leila Gal Berner, Professors Judith Wegner, Judith Baskin and Deborah Green, among others, and *Shabbat Alive* leaders Evlyn Gould & Emily Fox – as well as our extraordinary TBI preschool director Carol Diller. I'd especially like to thank the following rabbis from whom I've learned at TBI: R. Hanan Sills of Ad Olam (former Hillel rabbi); R. & Prof. Jonathan Seidel of Or ha-Gan; R. Shoshana Spergel & Jesse Rappaport who so capably assisted our chevra kadisha (along with Irwin & Joan); more recently, R. Maurice Harris & his wife Melissa Crabbe, and R. Boris Dolin & his wife Sarah, all of whom have enriched our lives with teaching, services, outreach and caring for others. Melissa Crabbe and Boris Dolin, at different times, both lived in Japan for years, speak Japanese, and share a deep appreciation & understanding of multi-cultural and interfaith diversity, like our own Jewish-Japanese-American family, and other families in our community. *All* of these rabbis and teachers are great role models for me of what it means to be Jewish, to learn and practice Jewish values in the world, and they've been an important influence in my Jewish American life.

The past few weeks have been very difficult and heart-breaking for our family...knowing that our beloved R. Boris will not be continuing at TBI...our loss is another community's gain...as Rabbi Sokol said, "Rabbi Boris is a *tzaddik*, a righteous man." And I look forward to getting to know R. Ruhi Sophia and her husband R. Jacob Siegel.

Over the years, I've been blessed to share Jewish life with family & friends, and participate in meaningful activities, such as *Chevra Kadisha ctte*, *Rosh Chodesh group*, and other groups. For many years I had a dream to build a community mikveh that could be used by anyone for various purposes; traditionally, a mikveh is built before a synagogue, but unfortunately, it was one of the first items to be eliminated from the new building budget. So my dear husband Joseph used his inheritance from his mother to build a mikveh at our home instead; as some of you know, Joseph is the one who actually does the work, the mitzvah of maintaining the mikveh. Kol ha kavod Joseph! Later this Summer we will be moving in with our kids and grandkids, as we're getting older, so if you know anyone who wants to help with the mikveh, please let us know.

Lastly, we are blessed because our son Asher and daughter-in-law Harumi live nearby and are TBI members. They had a civil marriage in Japan in 2000, and the next month were married under the chuppah in Eugene by Joan Bayliss, who is another one of our wonderful lay rabbis and friends. We are so proud that Asher & Harumi are both engaged in the honorable profession of teaching and they are wonderful parents; some of you may know Harumi from TBI preschool. Asher and Harumi's 3 kids (our grandkids) Ari, Kira, and Joe have all grown up here, from TBI preschool through Talmud Torah. Ari and Kira will celebrate a joint bnai mitzvah next Spring, and Joe may go to BB camp this Summer. Joseph & I hope to visit Israel again, together with our kids and grandkids. I am truly grateful to see Jewish life & learning continue from generation to generation.

So from 1965 to 2015, that is a summary of 50 years of my American Jewish Life.
Shabbat Shalom.