

My American Jewish Life March 14, 2014

Shabbat Shalom, and thank you Rabbi Yitz for the invitation to participate in this series of My American Jewish Life.

And just for clarification, I am not related to Ellen Rifkin!

I grew up the second daughter in a fairly secular Jewish family in the north end of the San Fernando Valley, in the small town of Sylmar, California. This was not the part of the Valley to make me a “Valley girl”. I am third generation American with my father’s parents born on the East Coast, and my mother’s parents born in St Louis, MO. As far as I know, most of my great grand parents came from the areas around Vilna and Minsk.

We would celebrate Hannukah and Pesach with great aunts/uncles, aunt/uncles and cousins as well as attending High Holidays with my maternal grand parents when I was quite young. My great uncle would give us all a silver dollar after we found the Afikomen! I remember getting dressed up for High Holidays, wearing my new clothes, new shoes and gloves. Typical attire for the late 50’s/early 60’s.

I remember a time when my paternal grand mother who lived in Hollywood took my sister and I to someone’s home in that area for Sukkot. It must have been an Orthodox family as the father of the family had a long white beard and wore a black suit. There were lots of children running around and the Sukkah was off the back porch, was fully decorated.

This grand mother also took me to see the movie, Fiddler on the Roof when it first came out. She also took an older friend of hers with us. My grandmother told me that the friend could not hear well but that the sights of the old country would mean a lot to her!

My paternal grandmother was an electrologist in Hollywood and created Rita Hayworth's widow's peak. She was also a known handwriting analyst who appeared on the Art Linkletter show back in the day of black and white television. Here is a picture I found of my grandmother with Art Linkletter.

The part of the Valley that I grew up in did not have many Jewish families. I was usually the only Jewish student in my school until middle school and high school when that number went up to 2. The other family had a jewelry store in the neighboring town of San Fernando as did my maternal grand parents.

I would gladly contribute what education or food items pertaining to the Jewish holiday of the time during my elementary school days as well as into middle and high school days, as a means of enlightening my non Jewish friends.

I did attend Sunday school for a few years during elementary school at a Temple that was a few towns from home. I did not connect with those students since I did not see them during the secular school day at my public school. Needless to say, I dropped out of my religious school education at about age 11. There was no talk about becoming Bat Mitzvah or confirmation down the road.

During my freshman year in high school, due to racial tensions in the area, we had staff coming in from LA County Human Relations Council to run a educational programs for the staff and students. A couple of the HR staff mentioned that they were going to be staff members that upcoming Summer in a program that might be of interest to many of us. I did participate that summer in a week long human relations workshop sponsored by the National Conference of Christians and Jews. It was a very intense week of looking at all aspects of ourselves. Approximately 120 students and 30 staff meet up in the mountains outside of Redland, CA to learn about family dynamics, race, religion, socioeconomic issues

as well as to have fun. Participants and staff came from all walks of life. Some students had never met a Jew or even any person of color before let alone a gang member, or someone who identified as gay or lesbian. For me, at the time, my Judaism was reawakened due to the activities around how we identified our religious and cultural practices. When I came home from the camp and shared the experience with my maternal grand mother about my reconnecting with my Jewish roots, she said that it was something always there in my heart!

About that time in my life, many people were coming back from Israel with their names written in Hebrew. I did not have a Hebrew name at the time. I asked the two Jewish staff members what would be a name for me so that I could create my own name jewelry since I was fairly skilled in jewelry making during high school. They said “ Eshit Chayil”, woman of valor from Proverbs 31. This necklace is what I made at that time (pointing to my neck).

For several years to follow that first camp experience I returned each summer as a cabin leader and then as staff as the Jewish identified team member. To this day, I feel that those years of camp activities have contributed to my Jewish identity today. And one of the staff members from my early days is here, Neil Van Steenbergen (pointing Neil out in the shul).

During my undergraduate education at Cal State Northridge, I became involved in a Jewish Outreach program. I met and became very close to 4 other Jewish women who also have had great impact on my life as a Jew and as a woman as we all grew up together. I am still in touch with 2 of the 4 who are living in LA. I try to see them when I return to So Cal.

I might add that I made a meuzuha casing in one of my metal smithing classes during my undergraduate studies. It is hanging on

one of my doorways at the present. I also took a Jewish Thought and Art class from Rabbi Bill Kramer (of blessed memory). While my classmates did research for Rabbi Kramer on the Jews of Boley Heights, I researched making a charm of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life with the spherot. I did get an A in the class and the Rabbi bought the piece from me at the end of the semester!

My undergraduate years were also filled with developing an understanding of the farmworkers movement and the work of Cesar Chavez. I became a community boycott organizer, receiving a semester's worth of independent credit from Chicano Studies department for my efforts to educate the community about the various unfair labor practices that effect those that responsible for the food we eat. I did have the opportunity to dance with Cesar after sharing a Thanksgiving meal at the Union head quarters in La Paz, California. What a wonderful man he was!

After I reconnected with my Judaism, I did experience discrimination, once when applying for a job as an undergraduate living in the San Fernando Valley, where the store owner interviewing me, commenting that he would not hire me because I would want the High Holidays off. At that time I was so shocked that I just left the store. The next time it happened, I was living in San Francisco and responded to an add for a weekend worker at a glass boutique in Ghirardelli Square. This time though the owner would not hire me because he did not want me working on Shabbat! He was an observant Jew. And much later in my years of living in the Bay Area, I took a Hebrew calligraphy class from his wife.

I moved to the San Francisco to complete my degree as an occupational therapist, having switched to this graduate degree when I realized that my undergrad degree in Art was not going to assist me with gainful employment. While living in the San Francisco area, I had the opportunity to participate in many Jewish

events. I usually attended Jewish Singles events, whether a lecture or dance. It was at one of these lectures, I heard/met Jonathan Seidel. I found his topic of Love Magic to be fascinating and took notes. I realized that I might contact him in the future as I had given some thought to getting back in to jewelry work, creating Jewish ritual objects. As history would have it, we were married a couple years later. Through Jonathan, I had a treasure chest full of connections with other Jewish artists and scholars in the Bay Area as well as nationally. I did create the wax for the casting of our wedding bands as well as fabricating a tallis clasp that represents the front of the first Temple with the columns marked with Boaz and Jochin.

In 1996 as we moved our family from the Bay area to Tucson, AZ, I had the great opportunity to meet Shonna Husbands-Hankin and learned to paint on silk. Little did I know that this was going to help me launch my small business of Judaica in Silk during our 5 yrs of wandering in the desert of Arizona before moving to Eugene in 2001. I had the great pleasure of creating the process of “ Hiddur Mitzvah “ adorning or making beautiful Jewish life.

I created personalized tallitot, challah covers, Mizrachs, tallit bags, kippahs. I was able to put my creative efforts through a 2-D method into something more 3-dimensional. In several of the shuls in Tucson, you will see my work worn on the shoulders of many just as when you come to shul at TBI you see Shonna’s work.

I continue to participate in the TBI and the Jewish community at large as a member of the Chevra Kaddish, a cook on the 4th Sunday Interfaith serve the homeless breakfast AND we can use more helpers!, responding usually with a “Yes” to when Shirley Shiffman or Shirley Chase might call to help out with something, and I have coordinated the Mitzvah Day project of making a meal for the Children’s Mircale Network house the past couple of years.

You will generally see me wearing small Star of David ear rings so that others in my work place and as I go through my daily activities are reminded that I am proud to be Jewish and that there are Jews in Eugene, OR; I will bring in Jewish holiday decoration to my place of employment and have even blown Shofar sharing our rich tradition during High Holidays.

I do feel that Eugene is now my home so much so that I purchased a plot in the TBI section of the Masonic Commentary a few years ago! I love living in the neighborhood of TBI, being able to walk to Shul and to share Shabbat with others in the “hood”.

I would like to close by again thanking Rabbi Yitz for this chance to share my American Jewish Life as it gave me the opportunity to reflect on how I did get to this time and place of my life, remembering so many wonderful memories from my past, recreating them in my mind.

Shabbat Shalom!