

Shabbat Shalom

When Rabbi Yitz and Nina invited me to talk about My American Jewish Life, I told them that I did not know what I would say – had never thought about this topic. So, Nina sent some talking points/questions for me to think about - here is what she sent...

What were the major turning points in my connection with Judaism?

Who and what influenced any disconnection and/or reconnection with Judaism?

How has living in two worlds, the secular world and the Jewish world affected my relationship with Judaism?

How has it affected my relationship with the broader community?

So, I agreed that I would do this talk tonight – and now, a bit of history about me

I am the oldest of three children. –I was born on a July day in 1939 in Chicago at the hospital where my father was on staff as a medical doctor. I lived in Chicago first on Chicago's West Side and then in West Rogers Park (for those of you who know Chicago) until after my high school graduation.

My grandparents (my father's parents and my mother's parents) came to Chicago from Bershadt, Russia (near Kiev and now the Ukraine) as did my father and 4 of his 6 siblings. My mother was one of 5 children and the only one who was born in the United States – also in Chicago. My father came to Chicago at the age of 13 and he celebrated his bar mitzvah while en route to the US while waiting for permission to go on the boat to Ellis Island... He rapidly learned English and completed elementary school, high school and college went on to become a medical doctor. He interned in, then, a small town in Illinois – Moline, Illinois where the local newspaper printed a story about this young intern who had escaped from Russia (from the czar) carrying one of his his younger brothers on his back.

My father had a family practice. He made house calls – delivered many babies – family practice was different in those days. I have strong memories of my father going to patients home with his black doctors bag and in the snowy winters with a bag of sand in the trunk of his car so he would not get stuck when leaving a home... The majority of his patients were poor – most not Jewish and with many he bartered services... for example, our home was painted by one of his patients and he delivered many babies for the painter and his wife.. I learned to drive by making house calls with my father at times when I was not in school...most often, I waited in the car while he made the house call.

My Mother was a homemaker. She was active in a variety of community activities and in the conservative synagogue where our family was a member –located about one block from our home. (An aside, I recently visited this neighborhood in Chicago – West Rogers Park where I lived until I was 18– it was a mixed community, tho primarily Jewish then – but now every home is occupied by a very orthodox Jewish family – women wearing wigs, long skirts... many strollers outside of homes... However, the main shopping area about one mile from where we lived has a small Jewish area with, for example, kosher butcher shops, but it is now a huge East Indian shopping area. A street sign reads Golda Meir on one side and Indira Ghandi on the other.... Actually, it also reads Devon avenue – the “real “ name of the street too.

Our home was the gathering place for all the many cousins (well over 30 first cousins ) and aunts and uncles... Cousin Clubs were held at our home and every weekend we had company- visits from many of my aunts, uncles and cousins....my father was the doctor for all the relatives.

My grandmother (my mother's mother, Bubbe Esther) lived with us as my grandfather, her husband, died I was 2 years old... She spoke only Yiddish , but understood English.... I understood Yiddish , but

I did not speak it and now probably no longer understand very much Yiddish... she would read the Forward (I now subscribe to The Jewish Daily Forward – the online version in English – is it still written in Yiddish?)...she would practice writing her name Esther Tycher over and over on any paper in her reach. ... perhaps, so she could sign documents...social security?? I spent my early years in Chicago with my two bubbes and one of my zeides.

My father's parents lived with my father's sister when they could no longer live alone, but I have fond memories of attending seders at their home (over 30 of us there) and being carried home after midnight after a very long seder. To this day, I do not enjoy long seders.

I attended Hebrew School 4 afternoons a week and on Sunday too until I was 13. –I was one of two girls in the class...actually in those days few girls attended Hebrew school, but it was important to my father that I did. Hebrew School was at a synagogue about a mile and 1/2 from our home... the synagogue near our home where my family later participated might not have been built at the time I attended Hebrew School. Both are conservative synagogues. I regret that we were never taught conversational Hebrew – we learned to read and write Hebrew... I can still read Hebrew, but with the vowels.

Our Family kept kosher and this was different from the majority of my friends - we had 8 sets of dishes – the 2, meat and dairy for everyday meals, the 2 that were special for holidays and special events – and the two meat and dairy that we used only for Passover... all dishes and our home, primarily the kitchen were completely cleaned before Passover.

.... Early on, my father had office hours on Saturday, but in later years he and decided not to drive on Shabbat, to go to his office or hospital or to make house calls .... I think this occurred after I was graduated from h.s. and was no longer living at home. I don't know why he made this decision. I was always expected to be home for Friday night dinner and always was– typical Friday night dinner included chopped liver or gefilte fish, chicken soup/ My father said Kiddush – we often had company... then when I was in h.s, I was allowed after dinner and helping with the dishes to go out to parties and dances ....and this, when thinking about it now was the compromise... home for dinner and ok to go out after....

After high school (the same high school as Irwin Noparstak )... 4,000 students and 90+ % Jewish. This hs had clubs and in the club I was invited to join there were a few girls who were not Jewish – in fact, I remember helping them to decorate their Christmas tree... an adventure for me.

After graduating from high school, I attended Indiana University (joined a sorority – SDT, a Jewish sorority - thinking back on it now – clubs and sororities do not seem like something I would do)... and after a year there (and at 19) I was introduced to Paul who was a student at Stanford, but his family lived in a North Chicago suburb (Highland Park) and next August it will be 55 ago that we were married. His family is Jewish, but were a very assimilated Jewish family– they had a Christmas tree in their home which startled me the first time I visited his home.... However, there were no more trees after Paul and I met.

So, when I was 20 and Paul was 21, we were married . I left Indiana University and enrolled in the U of Michigan in Ann Arbor where Paul was a graduate student in Psychology (along with Mike Posner). We had three children while there... Scott is now 53, Steve is 51, and Lauren is 50. We adopted our son Dan later – in 1970. He would be 43... it is 14 years since he died. We have 5 grandchildren – from age 6 and ½ to 26 and two wonderful daughters in law... More on Dan later...

We moved to Eugene in 1964 (still live in the same house)...It was the Oregon Research Institute in its first iteration that brought us here.

I was home with the three older kids and when they were enrolled in school, I became active on school committees... on the committee to make 4J kindergartens public, the committee that brought the magnet arts program to Edgewood Elementary School, joined the League of Women Voters and served on study committees and started to work with fellow democrats on many election campaigns.

Also shortly after our arrival here, I taught TBI Sunday School for a year or two when Rabbi Neimand was the Rabbi ... our kids did not go to Hebrew School... The Jewish community was not the same active and vibrant community it is today... in fact, our older 3 children and the Liz and Leo Siegel kids (they are a bit older) were the only other Jewish students at Edgewood Elementary School. The Posners arrived in Eugene the year after us (also from Ann Arbor ) – ...our sons were sometimes confused with the Posner's sons....Oren and Aaron.... Probably because there were few Jewish kids in Eugene and, in fact, Sharon and I were sometimes confused with each other.

In 1970 we adopted our son, Dan, who was 6 weeks old. He was an African American child who was born in Portland. I was the chair person for an organization called Open Door for Adoptable Children then and we knew that many children needed to be home with families who would love and care for them.... And we surely loved Dan. Being African American was not ever an issue for our families, but it was important to my parents that he would be Jewish... so, when he was 3 months old (and I after talking to Rabbi Neimand , I contacted Rabbi Geller in Portland at the the Orthodox synagogue, and with his support, Paul and I took Dan to Portland and Dan and I entered the mikvah at Neveh Shalom (I think it was there) for a Jewish conversion and he had a ritual circumcision as he had been circumcised at birth... We told him that this was his first Chanukah and it would entitle him to future Chanukahs...He later (and I will get to that in a minute) decided to ratify the Jewish conversion we arranged for him by having a bar mitzvah at the Kotel in Jerusalem.

More about school in Eugene in the 70's.... When our daughter was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade (Spencer Butte) and it was the December holiday time, her French teacher required that each student make a nativity scene... Lauren did not feel comfortable doing that (she was the only Jewish student in the class) so I talked to the teacher who pulled that assignment. When Dan was in first grade at Edgewood (would have been around the same time), and in a school concert, his first grade class was to sing Christmas Carols ( and not only Jingle Bells ) but the more religious of the carols... he did not want to do this and was reprimanded for this until I intervened... I don't think this level of holiday celebration is done any longer in Eugene or in public schools – is it?

Our family (all 6 of us) were in Israel in 1973 and 74... we were there during the Yom Kippur war... quite an interesting and , sometimes frightening time to be there - Paul's two Israeli colleagues (Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman – Kahneman of the now much read “Thinking Fast and Slow” – were here the year before to work with Paul at Decision Research and invited us to come to Israel so that Paul could continue his work with them.... Dan who, was 3 went to a neighborhood pre-school ( a Gan) and the older 3 kids to the neighborhood school in Bet Hakerem.... We had/have many Israeli friends and relatives in Israel and have returned to Israel many times...we were there twice during the past 4 years and will be there again in June as Paul is a presenter in a conference to be held in Jerusalem.. When we were there in 1973, Paul and our son, Scott, celebrated their bar mitzvahs at the Kotel....Paul had not been a bar mitzvah earlier. Dan, our youngest son, celebrated his bar mitvah at the kotel in 1984 and Steve, in Chicago at my parents' synagogue. Lauren was confirmed at Temple Beth Israel – a practice that Rabbi Kinberg initiated... I don't think there were many, perhaps, not any bat mitzvot in those years.

There was no Jewish Federation in the 1980's so Rabbi Kinberg and I started The Council on Jewish Life.... Jill and Gary Katz were also founding members and Jill's brother, Tom Goldman, (now a prominent NPR sports commentator) was a UO student and he helped us with the CJL newsletter...We helped many people in distress – met them at the Greyhound bus station when they were stranded, housed and fed them... arranged for food for hungry families and more...Rabbi Myron, and our family did much of that work...

Rabbi Myron, Paul and I and three other families in Eugene were the primary sponsors of a "boat people" family from Vietnam in the late 70's – early 80's – still see them and keep in touch with them (George Kahn with his German accent tried to teach Trum to speak English)... we raised money from many TBI members so that we were able to rent an apt. and furnish it for the Doans. We enrolled the kids then 8 and 10 in school (Willard), in soccer and dance classes and helped Trum, the father, to find a job and Cam to enroll in an LCC program... Trum, Cam and Think came to visit us a few years ago before Paul and I went to Vietnam. It was a very moving experience for us to see the parents after so many years... the children, now adults and their children have visited us several times and think fondly of the help they got from TBI to come to the US... this, through HIAS.

This experience came in handy when last summer we helped an Ethiopian family who are in the US on asylum to come to Eugene... I had worked with Jerry Maliner years ago as we both were interested in the Ethiopian Jews who wanted to make aliya to Israel and Paul and I had hosted a woman from Ethiopia who was in Eugene as a delegate to one of the MIUSA programs. In April of 2011, Paul and I joined with a travel group from the JCC in San Francisco for a trip to Ethiopia with a specific focus on the Ethiopian Jews... to visit those were approved and waiting to go to Israel and to visit the historic Jewish sites in Ethiopia – the synagogue, the cemetery, the work that the Joint Distribution Committee does there... We spent time with Dr. Rick Hodes (who Naomi Kirtner, Jeff Goldenberg, Abi and Tsion have met) and had Shabbat dinner with Dr. Rick and his many kids.... Our time in Ethiopia was wonderful.... Learned a great deal about how the Israel government/Jewish Agency worked to prepare the Ethiopian Jews so that their arrival in Israel would be comfortable for them and for Israelis... longer story for another time. While there we met with the Israeli interim ambassador to Israel who was in Ethiopia to negotiate for a shipment of Tef (this to make injera) to be delivered to Israel. The new ambassador is a beautiful Israeli woman who was born in Ethiopia and arrived in Israel with one of the first two airlifts – Moses or Solomon. We also visited with Hannan, our Ethiopian guest and friend.

I was faculty in the UO COE in special education from 1984 to 2010. I worked with families who had children with disabilities – especially h.s. age sons and daughters the parents and their children with disabilities plan for the transition to the world of work, independent living, postsecondary education.... I worked with community college and Vocational Rehabilitation administrators and staff in these efforts... My Colleague at the UO for all those years was Brigid Flannery (who many of you know as she also helps on Mitzvah Day and with the TBI Homeless Shelter, and often comes to high holiday services with me ).

I am currently a Eugene Masonic Cemetery Board Member, a board member and initiator of the Women's Opportunity Worldwide (explain), a Friends of Kenya Schools and Wildlife Board member), a Lane County Citizen Review panel member, a task force participant on a committee to address the Child Abuse Prevention Treatment Act, a participant in the work of the UO Center for the Study of Women in Society, participate in a Dining for Women local chapter, serve dinner once a month at the Dining Room, participate in the TBI Interfaith Homeless Shelter, Egan Warming Center, coordinate a work crew on Mitzvah Day at the cemetery, and every year we host two MIUSA delegates...

I have talked about these activities for a reason as I think what Ruth Messinger, the executive director of the American Jewish World Service recently said might relate to me. Messinger said : " There are a lot of different ways to be Jewish in the world". For example, my sister who is only 21 months younger than I and her husband are very frum... very religious – their kids are even more so... my sisters' sons, my nephews, board and learn in a very orthodox yeshiva and they and their family lived in Lakewood, New Jersey, a very orthodox community for many years.. When I visit her and sometimes my flight home is on a Saturday, I have the taxi to the airport meet me several blocks from their home so I would not be seen coming from their home. I know that I do not turn the lights on or off there on Shabbat, but in recent years I learned that I am not to take a shower on Shabbat – something about wringing out a washcloth – perhaps, this is considered work – and I do not even use a washcloth. My brother and his wife and several of their children are active in their respective synagogues. We do not argue about our differences and, in fact, get along, love and respect each other

– allow for and respect our differences. My sister knows that I am taking a taxi on Shabbat, but I do not ask permission and do not call for a taxi from her home.

My mother in her later years moved from Chicago to Silver Spring Maryland to be near my sister and Silver Spring Maryland is a community that was more comfortable for my mother than to have moved to Eugene. My father died at 64 – very young – we returned from Israel in 1974 earlier than we had planned when his cancer was diagnosed. My mother died 4 years ago at the age of 96. She had 19 great grandchildren and the very different names of her great grandchildren is interesting – I think it tells a bit of the story about the different lives her children have... some examples: my sisters grandchildren are Moshe Tzvi, Shimon, Yohevet Brucha, Leora, Mordechai, Yonaton and etc. , My brother's grandchildren are Orly and Tova – and Paul and I have Jacinto Camacho Slovic, Oblio Moon Mathai, Jia (she was born in Taiwan) and Spencer and Cameron... My mother loved them all equally... tho, she often had long discussions with our son, Dan, about his very long dread locks... discussions, not arguments... trying to understand why he wore his hair this way.

When thinking about the assignment to talk about “My American Jewish Life”, I came to realize that there are many variables that contribute to who we are – who we become... Whom we marry or partner with, where we live, whom we meet and our experiences with the people we meet and who our children meet have a great impact on whom we become. I was very fortunate to meet and marry Paul who, tho Jewish, had a different family orientation... we moved to Eugene in 1964 – a different Jewish community then... away from family... and found kinship with other Jewish families who , like us, were not very active synagogue participants... yes, we do have a Passover seder, yes, I do attend high holiday services and an occasional Friday night service, yes, I do observe the yartzeit of our parents and surely, Dan's yartzeit... yes, I participate and help to coordinate several of the TBI social service activities... but, I am very different from many of my family.

I do not know if its being Jewish that has moved me to be active locally and globally in the social justice/social service work that I do and has influenced me to be interested in and connected with a wide variety of people around the world... I know that many people who are not Jewish do similar work, but I **do** know that being Jewish is not solely about being religious and an active synagogue participant as many in my family are... again as Ruth Messinger of the American Jewish World Service says there are a lot of ways to be Jewish in the world.

I think if I were now able to ask my parents or grandparents , I think they would be supportive of how I am being Jewish in the world.

So, family, friends, social justice, social service, equal rights/ civil rights/disability rights are so very important to me, but so is Temple Beth Israel, the sisterhood, the many TBI committees, the Jewish Federation. I believe that we all need to support with our time, our energy, our ideas, our financial resources our wonderful Rabbis, the TBI Board, Nina, Shirley, other staff, teachers, Oriana, the many TBI committees – this, for my family and for others in this community...

And to quote from Rabbi Boris in the most recent TBI newsletter – Rabbi Boris was summarizing some of the findings from the recent study by the Pew Research Center on American Jews' identity, religious practices and beliefs.. Rabbi Borriss writes "Stay proud of the way that you are Jewish or connect to Jewish life, and be proud that there are so many ways to be Jewish. Beyond belief, practice, politics, theology and everything else that we could be worried about, this is what will keep Judaism strong into the future"

And Maram Epstein, the TBI President wrote in a TBI letter this week..."Jewish institutions will only survive with the support of the whole Jewish community. We understand that each of us has a different way of being Jewish; some find their spiritual home in Jewish liturgy, others take pride in our shared Jewish culture and commitment to tikkun olum, healing the world. Being Jewish is a lifelong journey of discovery of how we want to live our values." Amen... Shabbat Shalom