

Shabbat Shalom!

First, many of you may just know me as Stella's mom, but I do actually have a name. Stella, our star, normally steals the show. Tonight, it's my turn.

As a bit of an introduction, I'm not Jewish. Yet. I plan to be soon. COVID has put the brakes on my conversion.

Despite my non-Jewishness, I started attending services here at Ohel Sholom in May 2019, after meeting with Rabbi Roz. A friend encouraged me to meet with her as a first step to Judaism. I'm never really nervous doing anything, but I was definitely nervous meeting her. I'll admit that I felt like a major outsider.

4,000 years, and I'm just now dipping my toes in the water.

And meeting a Rabbi! Intimidating to say the least.

But Rabbi Roz, who is probably one of the nicest people I ever met, instantly made me feel right at home. Pretty much from the get-go, I felt that Judaism was going to be right for me. She told me that a good start was to come to services.

But my journey to Judaism started way before my meeting with Rabbi Roz and my first service. I grew up Catholic and my parents, who here tonight, were not strict with it, like their parents had been. I did have to go to CCD (the Catholic version of Sunday school for those unfamiliar) and receive the sacraments of First Communion and Confirmation. After that, it was my choice. Or at least that's how I understood it...

I never really believed what was taught in CCD, though. I memorized what I was supposed to memorize and went through all the motions. I never felt any connection to the faith or more accurately, the blind faith part of things. I just couldn't BELIEVE.

After high school, I *sort of* began to search for something else. Something that did NOT require faith or belief. I found yoga in college. Not that it's a religion, but it was my introduction to Eastern ways of thinking. Then Buddhism interested me. It was about action, not blind faith. Buddha was not a deity! He did not die for my sins, either. It was about suffering, compassion, and the path to enlightenment. It teaches that everyone experiences suffering.

The suffering aspect hit home for me. At that time in my life, I felt adrift. I felt sad. I felt hopeless. I was trying to find my place in this world but was having a difficult time. I felt very different from everyone else. I found out that these feelings had names. Depression. Anxiety. Bipolar disorder.

I did what I could to treat them, but still felt a sense of hopelessness.

Fast-forward many years to meeting my husband Jack. He was and is so supportive of me and my mental health. He kept telling me to find a religion because that's what it's about. Providing hope.

But still I hesitated. Organized religion was just not for me. I tried to look for some Eastern religious centers here in the area but did not come up with anything I found to be suitable. So, I stopped looking.

Then, on March 2, 2019, my big brother and only sibling died. He was only 44 years old. At his memorial service, a pastor spoke. I generally do not find anything of use in a pastor's sermon. But this pastor was different. Not only did he tap into my need to feel anger along with grief, but also to not feel guilty for experiencing a sense of relief along with the anger and grief. He also left out any need for faith or belief. I felt a sense of peace and fulfillment, and I really liked it. That was it, I thought. I needed to find a spiritual home.

Judaism was always in the back of my mind because it fascinated me for many reasons, most of which was its sheer staying power. Thousands of years. It birthed other major world religions. It emerged from the exotic, half a world away in a Holy Land. It took root in Eastern Europe, the place of my ancestors. It took root in Southern Spain, a place I have loved for a long time. It took root in other places, too, even China. But little did I know that it's so much more than that.

So I attended my first service in May 2019. The nervousness struck again. I was an outsider, and everyone would know it. I had a 13-month-old Stella with me, too. What if she would scream and cry the whole time?

I'd stand out like a sore thumb. My worries increased with every inch I came closer to Ohef Sholom.

My first interaction with the OST community was with a very kind gentleman. He came up to Stella and I in the parking lot, welcomed us, and kindly ushered us in under his umbrella, as it was raining. The first thing I blurted out was "I'm not Jewish!" He gave me a look like "OK..." and then introduced himself. He didn't miss a beat.

Going into the service, I had no expectations except for likely looking like a fool for not knowing anything. I wouldn't know when to stand or sit. I didn't know if I was dressed appropriately. Did I have to wear something on my head? Every possible worry flashed through my mind.

I think I blurted out that I was not Jewish to several other people on the way in, but received the same quizzical look and warm welcome.

The service was nothing short of magical. There was so much music. This amazing choir sang. I had no idea it would be so *moving*, even though I understood little. I tried to follow along as best I could. The Sid-dur started in the back! Regardless, the words therein were beautiful and caused my soul to feel awakened. The words and prayers were so positive and life-affirming. They were about gratitude for our links to the past, the world in general, and the noticing of Creation. Grateful that the stars are where they are. Kathryn Morton, teacher extraordinaire, once stated that the services were “pep rallies of the spirit.”

How true! The concept of Kavanah, or enthusiasm/gusto/conviction was in full swing. I found myself moving to the positive beat of a song about the delights of Shabbat! I was in awe. I was tearing up. And I don't cry easily. I was so full of peace and fulfillment. Stella fell asleep in my arms feeling the same calm I did.

And so those feelings continued week after week. I particularly remember a baby-naming service that moved me to tears. The loving words bestowed on that child were amazing. Hearing the song "Hallelujah" in Hebrew moved me to tears. The High Holidays services moved me to tears.

Along the way, I met new friends, and realized that old friends and neighbors came here, too.

I took part in programs about social justice and living a Jewish life in an interfaith family. I took part in programs with Stella to help her learn about Judaism and just have fun with other kids. I celebrated new holidays with their age-old traditions. Here, in this cold, dark, and hopeless world was an amazing community. A warm and welcoming community. Just like those new holidays, I moved from dark to light.

During this time, I started taking Intro to Judaism classes. They went way beyond the movements and rituals. The first thing that struck me is that there are no words for faith OR belief in Hebrew! I'm not TOLD what to believe and have blind faith. I'm encouraged to ask questions. I'm encouraged to act. What one person can do MATTERS.

The meaning of life is not to get into heaven for eternal happiness, but it's about making the world better while still alive. "Go forth and be a blessing" is the main idea. Sin is not the sin I learned about. It's about not quite hitting that target, and then having the opportunity to try again.

Choosing to make things right without a big production involving confessing and then begging for redemption.

There was no need to have blind faith in God, because God was and is a reality, all around us. God was like a neighbor.

Then I learned about the word "shalom." This one I love the most. More appropriately, it's more of a concept than a word. It does not simply mean peace like pacificism. It comes from the root word meaning complete.

It's akin to perfection and fulfillment. The arrow reaching its mark. Wow. Just what I was looking for.

I found a passage from the book of Esther that states:

“perhaps you were born for such a time as this.”

Tonight I'm wearing a necklace with a key on it. I had the word 'shalom' engraved on it. “Shalom” AND Judaism have been the key to unlocking my spirit and happiness within.

I leave you with one passage I love from the Sid-dur that sums up my experience with Ohef Sholom:

May the door of this synagogue be wide enough to receive all who hunger for love, all who are lonely for friendship.

May it welcome all who have cares to unburden, thanks to express, hopes to nurture.

May the door of this synagogue be narrow enough to shut out pettiness and pride, envy, and enmity.

May its threshold be no stumbling block to young or straying feet.

May it be too high to admit complacency, selfishness, and harshness.

May this synagogue be, for all who enter, the doorway to a richer and more meaningful life.

It certainly has for me. Thank you.