

Shabbat Shalom and L'Shana Tovah

It is difficult to distill a lifetime of Judaism into 15 minutes. While I cannot cover all that it has meant, I will talk about the times it has meant the most to me.

Judaism has always been my home, my family, my community, my place of life-time learning, my place of mitzvahs and holiness. My love for Judaism comes from my birth family. It has deepened with time and most important to me, it has carried me through times of loss and sorrow. Though I am not a Jewish scholar, Judaism is a way of life for me and is the core of my being in the world.

My parents, Frances and Lou Stadlin met at the Jewish Community Center in Newport News. My Mom's family moved to Hampton from NY. My Dad was a sailor in the Navy visiting the area. They married after my Dad left the Navy and moved to Queens, where my Dad worked for IBM. When I was six weeks old, my Dad came home from work and told my mother that he wanted to quit his job, that he did not want to raise kids in NY and commute. He thought they should move to Hampton to be near my Mom's family. My Mom was thrilled. It is there that I grew up with my extended family, my grandparents, Betty and Murray Wolsh, my great grandparents, Irving and Rose Wolshin, and my aunt's and uncles, Diane, Michael (all of blessed memory) and my Aunt Michele. I was the oldest in my family and the first grandchild...I always knew that I was loved. Our family grew, with the birth of my three brothers, Greg, 14 months younger than me and the twins, Kenny and David, 11 years younger and my cousins, Jamie, Joey and Stephanie. (Joey, Leah and Ivan are members of our Temple and have built an amazing home on the property where my grandparents lived.) I have one son, Steven, and a 7 year old precious granddaughter, Marlana.

I'll share some of my childhood Jewish memories:

-My family had all the Jewish holidays and Sunday dinners, together. Even as a teenager, it was something I looked forward to! There was a lot of laughter, good food and some legendary jokes. There were stories of my grandparent's courtship, where my papa removed the back of his brother's wardrobe, that was under lock and key and borrowed his royal blue suit to impress my grandmother.

-My great grandparents, would sit at the bus stop in Hampton, holding hands and eating ice cream cones, waiting for me to come home from school. I was always happy to see them.

-My great grandfather always called me Debala. He and his entire family were artists from Odessa and he was able to continue to paint when they came to the US from Russia in 1910. He had a penchant for betting on the horses...so he often greeted me with if only I had been at the track today, I would have won the daily double...followed by a dream of how he would spend it.

-We belonged to a small Conservative Temple, B'Nai Israel, in Hampton that was built about the time I was born. I always shared my Mother's love for temple. I stay in touch with some of the friends I made there and with my Mom's best friend, Evelyn Goodman.

-I probably should not admit this, but my Temple friends and I would sneak to High's ice cream on Yom Kippur.

-When I was young and would spend the night at my grandparents house, my Aunt Diane taught me the She'ma and the meaning of it.

-When I started first grade, my parents sent me to The Henrietta Kurzer Hebrew Academy at the Orthodox Temple in Newport News. I am very thankful for this instruction in Judaism, the history, speaking and reading Hebrew. This allowed me to form my beliefs at a very young age. I am not sure that my parents were thrilled with this decision, when at age 6 I came home with the proclamation that there would be no bacon or ham in our house if I was going to this school. Then I got into trouble with the Baptist neighbors. I am not sure how a group of 7 year-olds sitting under a tree talked about religion...but we did. I had no idea I had done anything wrong until my Mom sat me down and told me my friend's mother had called, because I had convinced her daughter that Jesus was not the Savior... that he was a good man and teacher...but definitely not the savior.

-As a young adult, I loved being able to host holiday meals at my home. I remember my first Passover, where one of my younger brothers said he would ask the questions and the first one was "Why is his night different..."

and his answer was “This night we are at Debi’s and have only one meat, every other night at home, we have two meats!”

The humor, the love, the laughter of close family suddenly took a turn when I was 35. Before I go into this, know that it does have a peaceful ending.

In 1989, my Mom died very suddenly from a cerebral hemorrhage at age 58. I had talked to her two hours before My Aunt Diane came home and found her. 2 months later, my Aunt Diane age 47 was diagnosed with stage 4 ovarian cancer and after a year, she passed. My grandfather had a stroke 2 months after my Aunt’s diagnosis.

I was crushed with each of these events. The underpinning of my life had been knowing that my family was always there, as was my relationship with God. I had never been required to question my faith, nor think of loss. I felt like the rug had been pulled out from under me. My son, Steven, was only 6 at the time and he would always know when I was lost in my grief. I knew I had to find my way through this.

So began my call, best summed up in this reading from the Mishkan Tefillah p 113:

***Once or twice in a lifetime,  
a man or woman may choose a radical leaving, having heard  
Lech I’cha-Go forth  
God disturbs us toward our destiny  
by hard events  
and by freedom’s now urgent voice  
which explodes and confirms who we are.  
We don’t like leaving  
but God loves becoming.***

How was I going to respond to this “call”?

Being an avid reader, I sought out books on death and dying. The turning point for me, was Rabbi Harold Kushner’s book, “When Bad Things Happen to Good People” This was based on Rabbi Kushner’s 14 year journey of losing his oldest son to Progenia or rapid aging. His journey led

him to write this book to make meaning of his son's life and to reconcile his faith. Two things really struck me:

First, was the idea that prayer in community, keeps us in touch with other people. These are people with whom we share our concerns and values, dreams and pains, experiences of all life cycle events. as Jews, we share with others the most joyous and frightening moments in community. Shiva is a reminder that as we grieve, we are not alone. Prayer allows us to know we are part of a greater reality and prayer puts us in touch with God. **By praying for courage, one can know that they are not alone and find the strength to bear the unbearable. By praying for grace and remembering what we have as opposed to what was lost, we can find gratitude.** The Kaddish is an affirmation of life and I love that in our Temple we stand together to recite it, not signaling out the grieving to rise.

Second, Rabbi Kushner says that the God he believes in does not send us the problem, but gives us the the strength, patience and hope for renewing our spiritual resources when they run dry. He believes Fate, not God sends us the challenges. When we reach the limits of our own strength and courage, a shift can occur. We can know we are not alone, that God is walking with us. We can go on. God does not cause our misfortunes. Some are caused by bad luck, some by bad people, some an inevitable consequence of being human and mortal. Once we understand the tragedy is not God's will, we do not have to feel betrayed by God when it strikes, we can turn to God to overcome it.

One last book that helped was, "On the Meaning of Life" by Victor Frankel. From his experience and his losses in a concentration camp, he came to the conclusion that everything could be taken from a man but one thing "the last freedom - **to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose how we respond to all that life brings us.**

Slowly, I began to realize that I had a choice of how I would respond to what life was bringing me. I knew I would change. I was open to change and to surrender and knew that I could not do this alone. I began to be able to listen to my inner voice within that was screaming for me to slow down.

I knew it was time to step up for my son, for my family and for myself. In the year I was to make partner, at Kaufman and Canoles, I had the

courage to ask to work part time and then the courage to take a leave of absence. There were so many questions . I needed time and space for healing and being there for my family. I kept going to Temple, to say Kaddish. I made the decision to turn to God and each week found a little more peace.

My choices surprised me. My leave of absence from my job at Kaufman and Canoles, turned into leaving the firm. This gave me time to be, and to be with and take care of my Aunt, help my family with my grandfather, and spend more time with my son and my grandmother. As a family, we still found ways to keep joy in our lives, to celebrate birthdays, and holidays and I took on that role in my home.

Through the difficult year and my Aunt ultimately dying, I learned to meet people where they were on their journey and to openly talk about death. It was something I had never discussed with my Mother and I regretted that. My Aunt and I talked about her feelings. I learned she wanted to be in a mausoleum with a window and not in the ground. I found this for her.

My grandfather's determination gave him 7 more years before he had another major stroke. We offered him the encouragement he had so willingly offered us. Back to the legendary jokes...my Grandfather had a repertoire of jokes. After his stroke, once he started laughing, he could not stop. Someone always said tell this joke or that one and he only could get a couple of words out before uncontrollable laughter would start...and everyone would join in. Maybe you had to be there, but maybe the idea that laughter is contagious is a real thing!

During this time, I found Ohef Sholom Temple. When I had moved to Norfolk in 1987, I had joined Beth El. As my son approached beginning to study for his Bar Mitzvah, I attended a Bar Mitzvah at Ohef Sholom and I knew it was a better fit for him and for me. It is here at Ohef Sholom that I have found my Spiritual home.

Looking back on this time it is clear that this difficult year called me to a more meaningful path. I committed to celebrating Shabbat every Friday and 20 years later I still love the pause of Shabbat. Coming to Temple allows me to feel closer to my Mother: the music, the prayer, all were such a part of what she loved and we shared. I never recite the Sh'ma without thinking of My Aunt Diane and remembering her. Most important, I found

my strength, allowing myself space to grieve and deepen into the comfort of my Jewish community, It led me to look deeper at who I wanted to be.

My Mom always said one of her kids would follow in my great grandfather's footsteps and become an artist. I never thought that would be me. My brother Greg always had and has amazing talent. Luckily I had a little talent, coupled with a strong desire to pursue painting. I remember calling Charles Kello, a local art teacher, and saying that I wanted to take classes with him. He invited me to come by for an interview. When I told him about Papa Irving, the artist, I was surprised to know his father and my grandfather knew each other from their sign painting days in Norfolk. The first painting I ever did was with Charles, and I felt in my entire body, this is what I was meant to do. Connecting with the beauty in the world and expressing it through painting and photography, is a big part of who I am.

I discovered I was not finished with the law, but wanted to do something more meaningful with my law degree. I signed up for an estate planning class, which led to a job at a small Estate Planning firm. All of the difficult questions and talks with my own family, really gave me insight and compassion on how to approach clients facing the inevitable. Pretty soon, I opened my own practice and I find it very rewarding and sometimes challenging to do this work with families. Always the aim is for peace of mind.

During my 58th year, (my mother's age when she passed,) I studied and became a B'nei Mitzvah to honor her and deepen my own love for Judaism. Reading from the Torah was a dream that I had always had. Sharing this with 8 other congregants and friends made it more meaningful and fun.

In the process of preparing for my B'nai Mitzvah, I did a painting called Eternal Fire, which I donated to the Temple. Occasionally, a painting comes from deep inside, and conveys the depth of a feeling, more so than beauty. In this piece, which looks like a circle of flames, I felt surrounded by my ancestors (each one of the flames) and their love and knew that their lives, my time with them, made everything I had done with my life possible. It was their fire, their sacrifices, their love, their stories, and their desire to give their children and grandchildren a better life, that ignited me

and allowed me to do the things I have done. To them I am eternally grateful, to them I owe my faith and deep love of Judaism.

I now know deeply the soul is eternal. I see the way my brothers and I share my Mom's generosity and way of being in life. There is a deep love of family (and connection though we live scattered throughout the states), a deep caring for each other and each other's children, a love for a good party, and laughing, but most of all, there is a kindness that can be called upon to help others. Through stories, my family keeps the memories of those who came before us alive with our children and grandchildren .

While my love of Judaism comes from my birth family, it is my Temple family at Ohef Sholom that now sustains me. To the families at Temple, the Seehermans, the Rubin's, the Nusbaum's who have opened their hearts , homes and shared their family time with me, I am deeply enriched and grateful. To Rabbi Roz and Cantor Jen, I am deeply grateful for the meaning they add to our community and my life and their love and friendship. I am deeply moved by the lifecycle events at our Temple and the opportunity for deeper connection, and the beauty of what is shared. Just as I know that I stand on the shoulders of the ancestors that came before me, I know we all share the bond collectively of those who came before us. For this I am deeply grateful.