

Miracles and Rites of Passage

SUE PEISER · SUNDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2015

My “Jewish Journey” from my talk at Kol HaNeshamah on 12/4/15

Hi. My name is Sue Peiser. I want to welcome the New Members of Kol HaNeshamah and share a bit about my Jewish Journey. You have certainly found your way to a welcoming, progressive Jewish community. For me, my spiritual quest has been searching for The Creative Divine Source, before I could have declared that I believed in God.

I remember when I first started coming to services here 10 years ago. Rabbi Michael Latz was the rabbi. I could not believe my luck that I'd found a congregation with a gay rabbi who was also a father. When I gave birth to my son 16 years ago, I knew that I wanted to be affiliated with a synagogue. As a lesbian mother, I appreciated the way Kol HaNeshamah was so inclusive. We attended services, but it took me a while to make the decision to join.

When my mom was dying in 2007, Rabbi Michael agreed to do her memorial service. My mom wanted to be cremated, and the Kline Galland rabbi chose not to be involved. This could have been a brick wall, but instead it was a portal into a deeper relationship with this synagogue. Rabbi Michael got to know her when she was hardly speaking. “I know you and Joshua,” he told me to let me know why he was gracious enough to take this on. One when he and I were both visiting my mom he asked, “Nauma, don't you want Sue to join the temple?” My mom shrugged, but his love for our family sealed the deal and we became members.

It's been a lifelong dream of mine to have a Bat Mitzvah. I didn't go to Hebrew school with the other kids from my neighborhood, in a suburb north of Chicago. After attending pre-school at the Jewish Community Center, I attended the North Shore School of Jewish Studies on Sundays. We were culturally Jewish, not religious Jews. I learned important values like Tikkun Olam, repair of the world. Pursuits of social justice and social action have been guiding principles

throughout my life. I would not trade off celebrating Jewish holidays and the feeling of warmth and community that I associated with Judaism. However, I have had a yearning since my childhood to learn Hebrew and to satiate spiritual hunger for which I had no name. I spent two months in Israel when I was a teenager with other American Jews. The program was transformative for me as part of my evolving Jewish identity. We had a test on basic Jewish historical figures in the first week, and there was a lot that I didn't know. A kid with a nasty chip on his shoulder asked if I was really a Jew. I immersed myself in my learning with a fevered pitch. My teacher helped us all cultivate a lot of pride in our varied Jewish identities and helped us bring our passion for Zionism back to the United States. I joined a Socialist Zionist youth movement with my best friend Robin. She is the only person that I know who studied Hebrew in high school.

Robin and I were very close as teenagers, but we lost touch for about 20 years. After my mom died, I found out that she and her husband and their three kids live in Sammamish. All this time she'd been right around the corner. She invited me and Joshua to visit. It felt like no time had passed at all. We all hugged and I stepped into her living room. She has a gorgeous living room couch that is purple with a raised swirly design. It looked very familiar because I have a chaise lounge that is exactly the same as her couch. She invited us over for Passover. It would be the first Passover since my mom had died, and we were brought right into the fold of their Seder. The timing was perfect.

We rarely talked about God in my house. My parents both described God as the creative spark in all of us. I didn't question the existence of God. I just didn't think about it too much. When I was 33, my son Joshua was born. On so many levels, his birth was clearly a miracle. I longed to stay connected to other Jews, and when he was attending pre-school at the Jewish Community Center, I started working at Jewish Family Service, helping to run the homecare program as a Client Services Manager. It was the first for profit venture of the agency. That money helped to fund emergency services. I felt so proud of my work for those three years.

Since I hadn't learned Hebrew as a child, it stayed on my bucket list for a long time. It took me three different attempts through classes as an adult. Four years ago I succeeded in a class where I made a promise to myself to practice for 10 minutes a night. I'd approached my other attempts to learn with great vigor, but the letters got all mixed up after a couple weeks. The commitment to making it happen the third time really paid off. I can't read quickly, but I can sound things out. The beautiful letters dance with life for me. Sometimes at services I feel caught between the worlds of Hebrew, transliteration, English translation, and commentary. I want to absorb everything without picking and choosing.

As an 8th grader, I watched my friends experience the rite of passage when they turned 13 and had their Bar and Bat Mitzvahs. I watched them chant their torah portion and the blessings. They also got to interpret a Torah portion and relate it to their own lives. The chanting was sometimes quite awkward with their voices trying to bridge the gap between childhood and young adulthood. I still watched with awe.

That ache in my heart stayed with me until I had the recent opportunity to join the B'nei Mitzvah class. In less than a year from now, I will have my Bat Mitzvah. Rabbi Zari is another one of my miracles. Rabbi Zari Weiss was my mom's rabbi in Northern California and then she became my rabbi. Judaism does that cool thing of linking us with our ancestors. My orthodox grandparents would be so relieved that I've continued to deepen my love of Torah, Hebrew, and Jewish culture.

It's impossible to discuss my spiritual journey or my miracles without talking about how my world split open and my heart expanded when I met the woman who will be my wife next summer. Mary belongs to Amazing Grace Spiritual Center. It's a church of religious science. What once freaked me out now delights me. Our interfaith relationship provides limitless opportunities to share loving kindness. Our wedding will be co-officiated by a rabbi as well as a reverend from Amazing Grace.

When I was asked to speak about my Jewish journey, I was still in the midst of a job search. I told Mary that I had full intention of finding the place where I could be of greatest service. Three weeks ago, I started my job at Providence Hospice of Seattle as an Administrative Assistant.

The name of this sacred place, Kol HaNeshamah, means that every breath praises God. I couldn't agree with this more.