

## Hatan Torah Speech

Marc Schwartz

Shabbat Shalom. I really feel honored to receive this recognition today and am so glad that my family is here to help me celebrate this occasion.

Being Jewish, for me, is not just a box to check off on a demographic survey; it is integral to my identity. My Jewish n'shamah defines who I am, and I revel in my connection to our amazing tradition.

How did I get to this point?

My mother, and my father of blessed memory, set the tone as I was growing up by living a Jewish life and maintaining a kosher Jewish household for me and my sister, Robyn. For Judaism to thrive, I think that it is essential for parents to imprint on their children's brains positive memories of Jewish living. I have tons of those memories – Shabbat candles and dinners, unpacking the Pesach dinnerware, visiting my grandparents at their synagogue during Yom Kippur services, lighting the Hanukkah, large family seders, attending morning minyan with my Dad for the annual siyyum ha-b'khorim study session in order to avoid fasting on the day of the first seder, performing the lulav/etrog ceremony during Sukkot (in that regard, one searing memory was the plaintively expressed hope from an adult congregant that perhaps our agricultural wavings would be able to reverse the fatal collapse of the 1964 Phillies - alas it was not to be), eating cake in the Sukkah, passing around the omnipresent spirits of ammonia on Yom Kippur to prevent fainting, and of course, amazing food...

(Remember this was back in the days when a total serum cholesterol level of 300 was deemed to be “normal.”)

Blintzes, k'nishes, chopped liver, sweet & sour prachas, chicken soup, matzah balls, latkes, fried matzah, roast beef, honey cake, kugel, schnecken, kamish bread, and deli in all of its iterations!

My home foundation was complemented by Hebrew School at Beth Shalom. I actually enjoyed the challenges of learning Hebrew and the historical details of our civilization. My Hebrew School experience, even now, evokes pleasant personal memories of an optimistic time in Jewish education at a thriving institution that used innovative techniques to foster successful learning. It was here that I learned to lead Junior Congregation services and to become comfortable with Torah/Haftarah trop. Bar Mitzvah and Confirmation followed in sequence, and then I graduated from the Gratz College Hebrew High School program.

I was fortunate to have spent these formative years during a golden era of suburban Philadelphia Conservative Judaism in a synagogue that would be

derided by many of the founders (and current members) of SHS as a “cathedral synagogue ruled by the wealthy and the successful.” Perhaps that was true, but as a youth I loved the grandiosity of the Frank Lloyd Wright structure and the educational, religious, and social opportunities that Beth Sholom offered.

In college (and later in medical school), I was a Hebrew School teacher for students ranging from 4<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, and because both positions were at Reform synagogues (that were both coincidentally named Keneseth Israel), I came face to face with some of the denominational differences among us Jews. Which reminds me of the story about...

A woman who goes to the post office to buy stamps for her Hanukkah cards. She says to the clerk, "May I have 50 Hanukkah stamps?"

The clerk says, "What denominations?"

"Oh my G-d," the woman says. "Has it come to this? OK, give me 34 Orthodox, 12 Conservative, 3 Reform, and 1 Recon."

I also had the opportunity to work with the college Lutheran chaplain, who couldn't have been more open to interactions with our Hillel chapter. In my senior year as president, we even built a Sukkah that leaned on the exterior wall of the Gothic cathedral that served as Muhlenberg's chapel.

In college it was also interesting to study Biblical Hebrew and comparative religion with professors who also were Lutheran ministers, with an occasional participating visiting rabbi thrown in for politically correct balance.

In those days, especially as Israel began to develop an identity that was discernible to the gentile world, there was a debate concerning how we should be labeled – were we Jewish Americans or American Jews? Back then, I always felt like a Jewish American, with the “Jewish” serving as an adjective for the “American.” But, more about this later...

My introduction to Society Hill Synagogue came, when as a Jefferson medical resident I, along with my friend Ira Rubinfeld, would attend Shabbat services at either BZBI or here. For me, BZBI was easy to relate to because it was a traditional Conservative synagogue. Attending services at SHS, on the other hand, was a much more interesting and complex experience. Sure, there was the standard siddur, but there were also loose leaf binders of “supplemental readings” that required an ambidextrous approach to praying, and, there was a rabbi who dazzled me with his erudition and expansive vocabulary. A definite impression was made.

Staci and I embarked on our life together with the commitment to carry on the Jewish life to which I was accustomed. It is through Staci's (and later Jamie's)

questions and challenges about the Jewish practices that had been second nature to me, that have encouraged me to grow in my own understanding of our culture. Over the years, I have amassed a collection of Judaic references, dubbed the “Bookshelf of Doom” by Jamie, to which I refer when questions need definitive answers and not just my guesses. Of course, in my quest to be accurate and comprehensive, I usually provide TMI, and am lovingly chastised for that.

I don’t have to review Staci’s commitment and extensive service to SHS, but her involvement encouraged my own participation here, beyond what I ever would have originally imagined. I was quite content to be a member, attend services, and participate in Adult Education when it struck my fancy. However, the more time that I spent at the synagogue, the more I wanted to become involved.

Stimulating Adult Ed classes, during which I have studied Rashi with Rabbi Caine, Torah with Rabbi Winokur, and Hasidism with Nathan Kamesar, have reinforced my appreciation of Jewish intellectualism. One class with Avi, *The Jew in the Modern World*, really reoriented my Jewish identity. By reading an amazing collection of primary sources, it became clear to me that despite our own internal classification, the external world has consistently considered us to be outsiders. Over the years, despite being quite assimilated members of many different societies (even here in the U.S.), we really are considered Jews and not Jewish.

Our SHS community offers each of us the opportunity to hone our Jewish identity in a variety of different ways. As someone who loves the rituals of Judaism, joining the Religion Committee and working with my Co-Chair, Terry Novick, has been a great fit for me. At our committee meetings, we engage in stimulating policy discussions, are not afraid to experiment, and are willing to step up and accept challenges. We shortened Shabbat morning services and added weekly Torah study, we conducted a lay led more traditional monthly service, we produced a transliterated siddur for both Friday nights and Saturday mornings, we supported Al Sutnick’s lay Torah leyners program, we took on the cantorial duties for every Shabbat during Avi’s sabbatical year when our cantor had abruptly resigned... you get the idea.

Speaking of religious observance...

When Sh’lomo first arrived in New York, the customs official searching through his bags was perplexed as to why he had 5 sets of false teeth.

He looked at Sh’lomo suspiciously and said, “My grandfather wore false teeth but he only had one set, why do you need five?”

So Sh’lomo explained, "I am an Orthodox Jew and ve can’t mix meat and dairy foods. Ve even have two separate sets of dishes, vone for meat products and vone for dairy products, but I am so kosher and religious, I also have two

separate sets of teeth."

The customs official shook his head and said, "Well, that accounts for two sets of teeth. What about the other three?"

Sh'lomo then said, "Ach, I'm glad you asked. Ve very religious Orthodox Jews also use separate dishes for Pesach – also divided into meat and dairy, but I am so religious, I also have separate teeth for Pesach, vone for meat Pesach and vone for dairy Pesach."

The customs official looked over his bifocals and then said, "You must be a very religious man with separate teeth for meat and dairy products and likewise for Passover. But that still only accounts for four sets of teeth. What about the fifth set?"

"Vell, to tell you the truth, vonce in a while, I like to eat a nice ham sandwich."

Participation in the Education Committee and interacting with committed people such as Carmen Hayman and Sahar Oz, while trying to optimize the educational experience for our children, has been a great source of satisfaction.

However, my most meaningful experiences here at Society Hill Synagogue have involved my family. I have felt tremendous pride in Staci's numerous accomplishments in reshaping synagogue operations, and in her dedicated service and performance in all of the roles that she has assumed here, including the presidency.

Of course, for Staci and me, Jamie's maturation from the cutest little preschooler to the accomplished young woman whom you see today has been our most spectacular experience of all. The Jewish events in Jamie's life – from her baby naming to her enrollment in Sunday and Hebrew School, and from her Bat Mitzvah to her Confirmation – have produced an incredible sense of pride and joy in us and have, hopefully, inscribed in her brain the engrams of her Jewish identity.

Here at Society Hill Synagogue, we are all privileged to have an administrative staff led by Betty van de Rijn, a clergy led by Avi Winokur, and committed members who foster a community that enriches the essential elements of Judaism – tradition, religiosity, intellectualism, empathy, identification with Israel, and tikkun olam. I am grateful that Staci, Jamie, and I have been a part of it.

Todah rabah, and to paraphrase Douglas Adams – thanks for all the *smoked* fish.