

Kallat B'reishit Speech

Phyllis Denbo

When Rabbi Winokur called to tell me that I had been chosen as this year's Kallah B'reishit, I was surprised, honored, and as it started to sink in, just delighted. He needed to know if I would accept this recognition of my commitment to Society Hill Synagogue. Of course I would accept but that meant I would have to give a speech about my journey to Society Hill Synagogue and who I am now because of my years here. Easy enough – that was the speech I gave three years ago at my Bat Mitzvah. Except, I really couldn't give the very same speech. And so, in the three weeks since the Rabbi's phone call I have been doing a lot of remembering and reflecting.

I grew up in Camden when there was a sizeable Jewish population. It was a working class community that supported three synagogues, one Orthodox and two Conservative, as well as the beginnings of a Reform temple that is now the 1,000-member Temple Emanuel in Cherry Hill. Many members of my immediate family lived near us – all four grandparents, who had immigrated from Russia at the beginning of the 20th century, and lots of aunts, uncles, and cousins. There were large family seders and an annual Cousins Club Hanukkah party.

Jewish education was an important part of my years in Camden. We belonged to one of the Conservative shuls, and two afternoons a week, I walked from my elementary school to the synagogue for Hebrew School. I also went to junior congregation services on Saturday and to Sunday School.

I was a very serious child and a diligent student who actually liked Hebrew School. When I had the opportunity to attend Akiba Hebrew Academy instead of the junior high school a block from my house, I was delighted, even though it meant a daily two and a half hour round trip from Camden to Har Zion Synagogue in Wynnefield, where Akiba was located at the time. I loved it. But at the end of three years, my parents were tired of schlepping me to Philadelphia for my social life and not happy about paying the rising tuition.

I entered Camden High School and two evenings a week went back to Hebrew School at my synagogue. I was confirmed that year, and because I wasn't ready to give up my Hebrew studies, I went to Gratz College for another year, again commuting to Philadelphia. Then my parents moved to Cherry Hill, and my weekly trip across the river became an inconvenience for the family.

My formal Jewish education had come to an end, and my practice became sporadic at best during and well beyond my college years. Eventually, we joined a suburban synagogue so our son and daughter could attend Hebrew School. But the place and the people did not project a Judaism that touched or inspired me.

Years passed. Our children grew up and left home. Eventually it occurred to me that we didn't have to belong to that synagogue any longer. And so I began a long and frustrating quest for the best fit shul-wise until we came to Society Hill Synagogue.

It was different in so many ways from any synagogue I had ever known. The congregation was warm and welcoming, informal and unpretentious, smart, non-competitive, and nice. Who would have thought that in my mid-sixties I would make so many wonderful new friends? At the Break-the-Fast meal a few weeks ago, Ellen Fennick sat down at our dinner table and said something that really struck me. One of the main reasons she so enjoys Society Hill is that she can sit down at any table here and find interesting people she likes being with. Yes!

And who would have thought that in my retirement years I would become so quickly and thoroughly involved in the life of a synagogue? I've been able to pursue my passion for Social Action with the Rabbi's encouragement and support and with the assistance of a terrific committee. I've had a number of other responsibilities over the last fifteen years here, as Terry just told you in her introduction, but I know that Social Action is what our members are most likely to associate me with. And so I've been thinking over the past several weeks of what I can say about why social justice matters to me, where it comes from, and how it developed.

It wasn't modeled at home. My parents were good people but always too busy ... with work, with family, with the immediate concerns of daily living. My early years were insular, as well. At Akiba, my horizons began to expand. I remember we took one of those career interest tests, which revealed that I had a strong affinity for social work. I didn't become a social worker. I thought I was going to become a teacher; that changed too.

As I continued to reflect on my educational and career choices, I recognized a certain pattern. My first job out of college was with the Public Housing Administration in Washington in their Office of Intergroup Relations. Our job was to look at the documentation on housing units under construction and comment on the likelihood of their being integrated. I then worked for the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations. I took time off for family and graduate school and got a Master's degree in Human Relations, an interdisciplinary program at Penn, and continued in their doctoral program in City Planning. Returning to work, I began a twenty-five year career in higher education administration. Most of those years were at a university in Newark, NJ, that was deeply committed to educating a diverse population and to serving the needs of the city in which it was located.

So my commitment to social justice has been there for pretty much my entire adult life, evolving and deepening with each experience. When I joined Society Hill and discovered it had a Social Action Committee, I knew I had found home.

I've since discovered new members who joined because we have an active Social Action Committee.

There's another journey, a more personal one that I didn't embark upon until we joined Society Hill Synagogue. I came here with an understanding of Judaism that can best be described as undeveloped and a view of spirituality that can best be described as skeptical. With our wonderful Rabbi – yet another reason I love this place – as enthusiastic teacher, intellectual guide, and discussion partner, my immature understanding of and views on Judaism, Torah, God, spirituality and much more have deepened, matured, and become an essential part of who I am.

There's one more recent journey I want to mention that, while not at Society Hill Synagogue, is very much connected to my spiritual development. Under the leadership of Rabbi Dayle Friedman, who has devoted her entire career to working with the elderly, twelve women in their sixties and seventies have been meeting monthly for four years to explore and discuss the path ahead – what to expect and how to best prepare for it. One thing that I've taken from this incredible experience is a daily gratitude practice. After saying Modah Ani and the Sh'ma each morning, I think about the previous day or so and what one thing I have to be grateful for. Very often my answer is Society Hill Synagogue.

Thank you Avi, thank you dear friends, thanks to all of you who've come up to me in the past weeks to wish me Mazel Tov for this very special honor. Your kind words have touched me deeply.

Shabbat Shalom!