

My Jewish Journey Symposium

Congregation B’Nai Israel

Yom Kippur 5782

Yom Kippur provides us all with the opportunity to ask G-d for forgiveness for all of the things that we have done wrong over the past year. However, this process of introspection also enables us to prepare to make the most of the many opportunities that lie ahead. My Jewish journey is part of the fuel that ignites my desire for self improvement - as a person, teacher, husband, and father.

When I think about my Jewish journey, the image of one climbing a tree comes to mind. Climbing a tree requires physical strength as well as mental fortitude. Every branch that I have climbed has not been about me doing the task alone. Each step has been rooted in the love and support of family and friends as well as key tenets of our Jewish faith.

This tree of life is one that I strive to hold onto in times of joy as well as more challenging moments. I may never make it to the top of this

tree, but I am still climbing due to the strong roots that anchor the branches. I am climbing to become more knowledgeable in the ritualistic traditions of our faith and to enhance my commitment to helping others.

My Jewish journey begins with my early childhood years as the youngest grandchild of Shirley and Jacob Yank Plotkin, my maternal grandparents. My grandmother's role in my early years was significant in helping me to understand our obligations to the Jewish community through acts of kindness.

She also happened to live next door, and her home was a gathering place for countless happy occasions. It was there where my nine cousins and I experienced countless Shabbat dinners filled with love and laughter and of course wonderful food. We would take turns saying the Shabbat blessings, and the memory of the blessing of each of us with the three-fold benediction stands out too. Family for us was a team sport, and we supported each other faithfully and consistently.

We were also expected to find our own way to make an impact in our community. We believed whole-heartedly in the concept of Tikkun Olam and our responsibility to help repair the world. There were countless examples from which to follow: my maternal grandfather Jacob “Yank” Plotkin served as president of the Jewish Community Federation of Richmond to be later followed by my aunt Cathy. My Uncles Jimmy and Ronnie also assumed leadership positions in the community. Within my generation, I am inspired by the work that my cousins Karen, Adam, Lisa and others have done in Jewish education and philanthropy.

While these experiences and examples of leadership have all had a large impact on my desire to serve the community, the strongest example of meaningful service has been my dad, Marvin Daniel.

Dad was raised in the Presbyterian church where he learned the importance of faith and service to others. He has helped my brother Pullen and I to see the value in every person while encouraging us to find ways to bring people together - especially folks from different

backgrounds. For the past several years he has led countless interfaith trips to Israel, guiding participants through a process of education into the foundations of Judaism and Christianity through interactive visits to holy sites.

I draw strength from his ability to consistently practice being comfortably uncomfortable. For example, I recall Dad attending many religious services at the temple with our family. He consistently put my mom, brother and I ahead of himself - always thinking others first.

His desire to learn and grow as a person of faith is inspirational to me. Dad also recently completed a degree program at Union Presbyterian Seminary and has plans to take on a leadership role in his church's efforts to work towards creating more equitable and inclusive communities.

And speaking of learning, the second branch of the tree illustrating my Jewish Journey is the education branch. Our Jewish faith and tradition place extraordinary emphasis on the power of learning as a

lifelong process, rooted in our responsibility to seek new knowledge and opportunities to challenge our existing assumptions.

This need to challenge my assumptions was made clear to me by my 8th and 9th grade religious school teacher, Mr. Robert Fried. I vividly recall him telling our class on several occasions that in Judaism there are no answers but only questions. Indeed, the power of questioning our assumptions and seeking to gain new knowledge lies within each of us.

I must also mention that I am not only the beneficiary of a wonderful Jewish education but also many years spent at St.Christopher's School, an all boys Episcopal day school in Richmond, Virginia.

There, Chapel services were required three days per week, and programming was anchored in the tenets of the Christian faith rather than the Jewish one. As a young student, I sometimes felt that my experiences there were in conflict with my Jewish identity. For example, the prayers and songs were different and I struggled at times to reconcile what I was learning from the Old Testament at

religious school versus some of the New Testament lessons at St.Christophers. Eventually, I began to understand and appreciate the common origins of these two faiths.

I also began to develop a strong interest in community service and engagement while a student there. My 11th grade advisor David Anderson encouraged me to volunteer at a local elementary school as part of our school's minimester program - an experience that provided not only a chance to work with young students in Richmond but also to see the important role that teachers play in the lives of their students. Similarly, I recall Billy Abbott, another advisor and U.S. History teacher, encouraging me to apply to the American Legion Boys State Program, which enabled me to develop an interest in politics and public service.

The educational component of my jewish journey next extended to Miami University of Ohio in Oxford, Ohio. There I had the opportunity to meet several Jewish classmates at the Hillel house, attending a few services along the way. Yet I must confess that I did not actively seek a particularly Jewish experience. My focus centered on making new

friends. Yet in the midst of a transition to a new school environment that was far larger than my high school, I found comfort in the Hillel experience. Everyone there was united through our Jewish heritage and desire to draw strength from it.

The concept of Tikkun Olam has been emphasized through action in all of my educational experiences- whether volunteering to help emerging readers in a local elementary school, collecting food for the hungry, or cleaning up trash in parks. We must use our interests and talents to improve the lives of our fellow citizens, especially our most vulnerable population.

For the past five years, I have had the privilege to be a classroom teacher of 4th and 5th grade teacher at Episcopal Collegiate School here in Little Rock. One of my favorite times of our school day is our daily Devotional time. Each morning I have the opportunity to share stories about the power of each person to make an impact in the world. Sometimes I draw upon the examples of noteworthy people from history to encourage students to see the many ways that they are able to make their community better.

We also discuss the many needs of our fellow citizens in Little Rock and how we as individuals and as a group are able to help - whether through prayer or direct action. I am guided in this work by the precepts of Tikkun Olam as well as the fundamental belief that each of us is a unique and special individual created in the image of the divine.

Third Branch- Marriage and Fatherhood

While the educational branch of my Jewish Journey tree has certainly helped to sustain me, the third and final branch of the tree that has propelled me on my Jewish journey is rooted in the blessings of marriage and fatherhood. My wife, Elizabeth, and I share a sacred bond based on trust and mutual admiration. While not only being blessed by the promise and possibilities of our own lives and shared life together, we are committed to the concept of l'dor v'dor - from one generation to the next. We find great joy in reciting the Shabbat prayers with our daughter, Ellie, as well as sharing many of the wonderful culinary traditions of our people with her. We know that the

survival of our people and faith depends upon the active participation of the next generation. We are thrilled that Ellie has the opportunity to learn about our faith tradition and the principles that make it special. And we are so grateful to have been welcomed into the Little Rock and B'nai Israel communities with open arms.

In closing, I want to emphasize my gratitude to G-d for the opportunity to be on this journey - one rooted in Jewish tradition as well as the rich experiences gained through the love of family and friends.

On this day of atonement, I hope that everyone finds strength through the power of introspection. May this year 5782 be a time of personal and communal growth. Again, thank you so much for the opportunity to share my jewish journey with you all.