JEWSH JOURNEYS

Name of Congregation: Shir Ha-Ma'alot
Address: 3652 Michelson Drive
Irvine, CA 92612
Phone Number: 949-857-2226
Number of Member Units: 385
UAHC Region: Pacific Southwest
Rabbi: Richard Steinberg
Outreach chairperson: Grace Katzenstein

Brief Description: Each month, a different congregant is invited to share his/her Jewish journey with the congregation. Each person's path through the waters of Judaism is unique and a story unto itself. From the experiences of Jews-by-choice to born Jews, this column shares the varied and many paths to and through Judaism.

Program Goal: To demonstrate how wonderfully different each person's path toward Judaism can be and that whatever one's journey, there is an inclusive place here for you.

Target Population: The whole congregation

Number of Participants: So far four articles have been published (and one is published each month). Every person who reads the article is participating in the project.

Staffing Required: The rabbi reads each article prior to publication.

Total Cost of Program: $0

Source of Funding: None

Fee for Attendees: None

Logistics: Each person is personally invited by the Rabbi to write the article. Each person is extremely honored to participate.

Evaluation of Program: So far, only positives have come from this. Those who read the articles have reached out to the authors for advice, commented to them because a connection had been made, or generally thanked them for sharing their Jewish Journey.
This month we introduce a new column entitled Jewish Journeys. This article will be written by a different member of our Congregation each month taking the opportunity to speak of his or her spiritual, cultural, or religious journey in Judaism. Some have come to Judaism through conversion, some through birth, some by chance and some by marriage. Whatever our path, being Jewish is all about the process that leads us and guides us. This column will be used to share and reflect on the meaning and significance of many of our members’ individual journeys.

October 24, 2002 (our maiden column!)

Coming Home... by Grace Nelson Katzenstein

Raised a religious mutt, I yearned for pedigree status. Living in a North Bronx Irish Catholic neighborhood, my father was a Russian Jew and my mother a bona fide Protestant Mayflower descendent. Mom wasn’t a churchgoer and Dad rejected all organized religion.

Clear memories of Aunt Fannie’s un-ordered seders live on. My bohemian, white-haired, blue-sneakered aunt would march through her Grand Concourse apartment holding the kiddush cup high chanting “peace on earth” to anyone listening. She served soggy matzah balls and left the door open for Elijah, who, for all we knew, was the elevator man. No Haggadahs and certainly no telling of Jewish liberation. (Odd, since my father’s family were pogrom survivors.) They (the seven brothers and sisters) somehow felt they had to do this but seem to have forgotten why. I just knew it was an annual meal for the Jewish side of my family.

Christmases were celebrated in true New England style with plum pudding, cranberry-strung trees, caroling and many home-baked cookies. Easter I had a new white-flowered hat each year for no other reason than keeping up with my neighborhood friends. I never went anywhere but around the block. We sometimes decorated Easter eggs.

I wanted the same blue-pleated uniform as Madeline O’Neill and the same soft-covered catechism book with illustrations of a bearded billowing grandfather gazing down over the pages. When my friends made the sign of the cross in front of St. Margaret’s, I did too.

Mumbling something about a father and son meant only that I belonged to their club for the time being.

My parents must have had a religious parenting crisis at some point because we ended up going to Sunday School at the Ethical Culture Society; in my opinion, an organization of secular aetheistic Jews trying hard not to be Jewish. Try telling another eight-year-old that you are “Ethical Culture.” It was hard enough not being an “O’Rosen.”

We mobilized upward to Northern Westchester County when I was 11 to a community where being Congregational and wearing madras were a religion. I begged my parents to become something, join ANYTHING! They believed they were doing us a service by not influencing us at all. Somehow as adults, we would magically make our religious choice. (PS: my brother is an atheist.)

I always knew I was Jewish. My fourth grade crush was a Jerry Goldstein. I held on to my name (Rosen), Aunt Fannie’s seders and my father and uncle’s Yiddish banter as the cornerstone of my Jewishness. In college I went to Hillel mixers and sought Jewish friends. I transferred from a WASP-y New England girls college to NYU and found Jewish friends all around me. For graduate school, I followed a Jewish girlfriend to Social Work school at Yeshiva University. It was there my Jewish education really began.

My classmates all knew the same songs and dances no matter where they were from. They belonged to a wonderful international club called Jewishness. I was an outsider among the O’Neills and still felt outside of this club too, but less so. I had at least a par-
tial birthright. I hated describing myself as "half Jewish" (upper or lower; right or left?)

At grad school, I read Buber, Frankl, Heschel and Weisel. I learned social group work at the 92nd St "Y" and the Educational Alliance, roaming Orchard Street during lunch, eating chopped liver at Ratners. Right after grad school, I married my first husband, a Jewish man 11 years my senior, weaned on Talmud in East Bronx yeshivas. He had rejected most of it. As I grew more Jewish, he grew less. However we agreed to raise our children Jewish. Intent that my children be spared my experience of muttahood, I sought a Reform Rabbi and went through a pretty meaningless conversion ceremony. I thought a few baruchas and a Jewish name would banish my struggle. It didn’t. Not yet.

Christmases ended. My kids learned Chanukah, Pesach and Purim, went to Hebrew school, the JCC day camps and even Jewish day school for a few years. In New Jersey, we briefly lived next to a family of Lubovitch Hasidim. I watched and learned from their daily routines. Little Schmuel didn’t get a hair cut until age 3; Sabbath guns were sought in a hurry if the oven wasn’t off by sundown.

My best friend married the son of an Orthodox rabbi. We started having weekly family Shabbat dinners. My friend Meyer led me to the rituals and prayers of Shabbat.

especially the blessing over the children.

We moved to California in ‘85. I divorced in ’90 and met my sweet Jim in ’93. We were married by Bernie and Arie at Shir Ha-Ma’alot in ’98. Jim introduced me to Shir Ha-Ma’alot; Bernie’s mystical spirituality was illuminating. Singing with the choir and coming to services started to give me weeks a rhythm punctuated by peace. Arie’s songs became my musical meditations. Enter Rabbi Rick. His message of a God who is nourished by our deeds and prayers and in turn, nourish us, made so much sense. Ritual gives us structured reminders of our moral compass; music opens up the paths to our souls; our souls release the energy and prayer that collectively God, who nurtures us and keeps us going.

Wow. Not bad from the little girl in the straw Easter bonnet who thought Elijah was the elevator man. This year I become a Bat Mitzvah together with about 10 other adults. Unlike my "conversion," this is the real thing. I’m not “half Jewish.” I AM Jewish. No doubt and lots of pride. Thank you, Rick.

Baruch Hashem.

For questions or comments, please contact Grace at gnelson975@aol.com.
We continue this month with our column entitled Jewish Journeys. This article will be written by a different member of our Congregation each month taking the opportunity to speak of his or her spiritual, cultural, or religious journey in Judaism. Some have come to Judaism through conversion, some through birth, some by chance and some by marriage. Whatever our path, being Jewish is all about the process that leads us and guides us. This column will be used to share and reflect on the meaning and significance of many of our members’ individual journeys.

By Alla Berman

At age five, I first understood that I was a Jew. It was the first day of preschool and I was sitting in a corner with one other child, watching everyone else play. The boy, Eddie, and I had been forced aside by our teacher when playtime was announced. She had instructed that Jews were not to mix with the rest of the group and commanded us not to touch the toys meant for the normal children.

From that moment, the Soviet existence was divided for me, into my world—that of the Jews—and everyone else’s. This awareness of a bright dividing line was reinforced daily as the handful of Jews in my classes were systematically separated and humiliated by our peers.

This was nonsense, not only for the obvious reasons, but also because it was practically the only way that we could identify ourselves as Jewish. Religion was outlawed in the Soviet Union, so I had no Jewish education to bolster my sense of identity. And, what few Jewish rituals existed for me, I did without understanding.

My mother, for instance, would proudly put Matzo on the table, next to the bread, when Pesach came around. So, all I really had was identification by contrast to the other children—they made sure we knew we were different.

Judaism finally became more than a label for me when my family left the Soviet Union. Throughout the struggles that immigration brought, I was exposed to Jews who had the freedom to learn about and follow our traditions. Organizations dedicated to tzedakah came to our assistance when we exited the Soviet Union and provided my family with a sense of community.

During this time, I finally began to experience the full meaning of Judaism. My family and I attended our first service, at Temple Israel of West Hollywood. English, back then, was quite difficult, and Hebrew was practically unthinkable. My husband, daughter, and I made efforts to hum along to the prayers, and follow the transliterations. With all of our efforts, we were still quite lost, but the congregation made us feel at home nonetheless.

At that point, I began to try to educate myself about Judaism. This too, has been a long process, as putting food on the table (or providing a table to begin with) was my family’s top concern. Little time remained for rituals and Torah study as I struggled to learn English and to start a new career. Still, our Jewish identity was a top priority for my family, and my husband and I enrolled our daughter, Julia, in a Jewish day-school. We were determined that she really be able to use her freedom in the United States and truly lead a Jewish life. To that end, my husband (though working all night at a power-plant) would spend his days sitting outside of her classroom at Temple Israel, supporting Julia as she tried to adjust to her new environment.

These efforts paid off and my daughter soon began putting her knowledge into practice. She taught me the Brachot for Friday night candle-lighting and instructed me on the foods appropriate for Rosh Hashanah. On Pesach, she ensured that the family had a proper Seder (this time without bread next to the Matzo). Now, I continue to learn both from my children and for myself, as I am finally able to explore Judaism.

Only now that we are comfortably settled in America and have found our home at Shir Ha-Ma’alot, have my husband and I really gained a full understanding of what it is to be part of the Jewish community in the free world. I take great pleasure in every service we attend, and every celebration (whether Pesach or the Sabbath) we share.
By Leonie Kramer

My Jewish journey began easily but with much fan-
fare. I was born into a rabbi's house and received
18 baby blankets and 41
dresses, size 1, from the
members of my father's
Reform congregation.

Light from the outset, the daily activities of our
family life were intertwined with the busy goings-
on of synagogue life.

I am often asked if it was difficult growing up
in a rabbi's house. In some ways, I found it to
be just the opposite. It certainly wasn't hard to
generally attend services and religious school (I
was a ride!) Observing the holidays and
honoring rituals came easily as well. In response
to another question frequently posed, I think
my parents did a fine job of not placing "pres-
sure" on me to be Jewish or to serve as an
example. I myself simply wanted to live life
wisely, since they had created such a positive
atmosphere in which I was raised.

In many ways, it was each of my parent's own
stories that influenced my development as a
woman. My own existence, growing up in suburban
Connecticut, was blessed and relatively unevent-
ful. On the other hand, my father had jour-
ned from Russia to Brooklyn, and from yeshi-
to Hebrew Union College. It wasn't easy;
definitely faced many challenges along the
way, but the least of which were economic.
My mother was born in Nazi Germany and
went to the Philippine Islands, only to then
catch up in the war of the Pacific. I learned
in my early age of all the physical hardships she
endured and the suffering her whole family
endured. My beloved grandmother, of blessed
memory, shared these stories with us even
when we were old enough to appreciate their
significance. Through American Jewish sol-
unteers in Manila after the war my
parents made connections with distant
veterans in Baltimore. The family eventually
moved there. My mother subsequently vis-
tied the City, home to one of those Jewish
women who had met in the Philippines. The
family took her to Friday night services, where
my dad happened to be serving in his first pul-
pit. My father immediately spotted my mother
in the receiving line. The rest is history!

My journey, thankfully, has been far less dra-
matic. Since I was well aware of the difficulties
my parents had faced, I was always conscious of
the fact that in being Jewish, I had been granted
a legacy of sorts. For me it has been a labor of
love to guard and protect that legacy. The road
has had a few bumps along the way. My brother
and I were never allowed to go trick-or-treating
since my father deemed it part of a pagan ritual.
(Everyone at school took pity on us and shared
their candy.) We could never participate in
any of the Friday night high school activities.

And needless to say, it looked very tacky to go
clothes and shoe shopping on Saturday. (In
those days, the stores weren't open on Sunday,
either.) But looking back on it all, those were
minor inconveniences. Growing up in our
household made it possible and also pleasurable
to keep the legacy intact.

My fondest memories involve the family rituals
and life-cycle events - my marriage to Jay was
witnessed by several hundred "intimates" (i.e.
temple members) - as well as those Friday
nights spent at the various synagogues my
father eventually served. At one point we
dubbed him the "bedouin rabbi" - he served
many pulpits, but his tent remained pitched. My
parents were determined not to move us
around as we grew up. Consequently, we were
blessed with continuity and consistency, and we
certainly benefited in the process. We came to
know everyone in town - luminaries such as
the other clergy (Jewish and non-Jewish), the
doctors and dentists and of course, the under-
takers. My brother and I recently came to the
weighty conclusion that for "preacher's kids,"
we didn't turn out too badly at all.

It is my sincere wish that my own children
have as pleasant a Jewish journey as I have had.
In many ways they face more challenges. But
one thing is for certain. Growing up in my
childhood home, the rabbi's house, has motivat-
ed and enabled me to make the start of their
journey a positive reflection of my own.
We continue this month with our column entitled Jewish Journeys. This article will be written by a different member of our Congregation each month taking the opportunity to speak of his or her spiritual, cultural, or religious journey in Judaism. Some have come to Judaism through conversion, some through birth, some by chance and some by marriage. Whatever our path, being Jewish is all about the process that leads us and guides us. This column will be used to share and reflect on the meaning and significance of many of our members' individual journeys.

By Lisa Goldman

The day was turning out to be a Spring cliche: sitting on the grass in front of the Cal State Northridge library, being one of dozens of other college students hanging together under the guise of studying. It was 1980 and I remember enjoying the moment immensely; what could be better than being a young college student relaxing with your friends on a beautiful Spring day? Especially if one of the members of your group is a really cute guy that you wouldn’t mind getting to know better...

This was the set-up that led me on a journey to explore and discover the depths of my faith. I was a nice Jewish girl and he was a nice evangelical Christian boy. He had a great family, great friends and seemed to have the perfect life. He said that the basis of his happiness came from his devotion to Christianity and invited me to explore it with him.

Now I wasn’t unhappy being Jewish; I had what for many was a typical upbringing in our faith 20 years ago: the family is involved with a temple until the son becomes a Bar Mitzvah and then you suddenly forget where the temple is at that point and cease attending. It wasn’t in style in my part of the Valley to have the daughters become a Bat Mitzvah, so I went to classes to be confirmed simply out of convenience to my parents while my younger brother went to Hebrew school—he’s at Hebrew school, so you may as well go also. As soon as he became a Bar Mitzvah and “was done,” so was I. Confirmation? What confirmation?

Now fast forward to when I was in college and religion came into question—I really didn’t have a good answer on why I shouldn’t explore Christianity (at least, that’s how I explained it to my shocked parents).

So began a 4-month odyssey into my attending Friday night Bible Studies and church every Sunday morning with my friends, much to my parents’ dismay. As I got dressed in my “Sunday clothes” every week and went off to services they were wise enough to withhold comment and allow me to make my own discoveries and search for whatever it was I needed to find at that point in my life. And find it I did.

At first it was wonderful being with great people whom I admired and enjoyed being with. As I learned more about Christianity and the expectations of this particular branch of the faith, I was conflicted as to how it could fit in with my life. Could I accept Jesus Christ as my savior? I rationalized to myself that ultimately the two religions shared the same God as I had believed in as a Jew, so they weren’t really that different from one another. For a time I very seriously considered converting to Christianity but I eventually realized that I would be doing it for all the wrong reasons.

The faith that I was lacking in my own life just needed to be re-awakened, not thrown aside for another “better” religion. While I loved the group of people that I explored Christianity with, who was to say that there wasn’t an equally great group of people to be found in Judaism? I realized that I hadn’t learned what it meant to be a religious Jew—although brisket and latkes are a delicious by-product of being Jewish, they are not the basis of Judaism as a faith. And I needed to find my faith...

So what began as a search as to the relevance of Christianity in my life ended in the discovery that what I needed to do is delve more deeply into the teachings of my own religion and for the first time in my life become a religious Jew. What a revelation this was! I found all my answers and a newfound foundation of faith that was to become the core of who I am: a nice Jewish girl from the Valley who now understands what it is to be Jewish.

By now you’ve probably figured out that I didn’t end up with the cute Christian boy... instead I got the right boy, the nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn. All you need is faith...