

I Belong
By Christina Weinberg
B’Nai Mitzvah Class of 2008

I am blessed to be standing here. I am so grateful for the wonderful clergy, the lovely and inspiring Lisa Bock, and to have been a part of such an amazing group, the B’Nai Mitzvah Class. My dearest aloha goes to the strong women who raised me-my mother, my grandmother, and my sisters-all whom have given me the love and support to be up here, as well as my husband Marc for holding my hand the whole way.

I was twenty-three when I got my first car, a 1984 Mustang GT, 5-Liter V8. For those who remember this car of mine, please feel free to roll your eyes! Don’t get me wrong. It was a cool classic, but a complete eyesore. Along with the homely exterior, it was a huge challenge to drive: learning to drive stick with a racing clutch, *and* I had to sit on two pillows to drive it! In the end though, all that mechanized muscle thrilled me. I thought I was hot stuff, and I would crank up Pat Benetar, *the* female rocker of my teens and enjoy her feminist sound and feel the purr of that engine.

I am years older now and driving a plain, vanilla, but ridiculously practical minivan. Seriously and strangely enough though, when I was thinking about my life theme or story for this speech, Pat Benetar’s song “We Belong” played in my head like a soundtrack. That song just brought me to tears, because it rang true, hitting home. The end of the chorus simply states, “We belong...we belong together.”

Belonging to Judaism, that’s my story and something more.

Growing up in Hawaii, my first encounter with Jewish people was actually on a film strip in the second grade. We were shown footage from WWII. Hard to believe for kids so young! There was no sugar coating it. It was graphic, unimaginable, and life changing. I remember thinking to myself, take *me* Jewish people-I will be one of you! Sadly, I knew even then you couldn’t make up for the miracle of another human being, let alone millions. I know some of my innocence was lost seeing that film, but I vowed to never to forget. I believe the seeds of my spiritual journey to Judaism were planted right then and there.

Fast forward to high school, I finally meet Jewish people in the flesh-my future husband Marc and his family. They were the gateway to Judaism and Jewish life. I learned much from Marc, but even more from his parents, especially Doris, my awesome mother-in-law. I felt alien and different when I went to Temple and celebrated Jewish Holidays with them, but at the same time, I felt something ancient and profound calling

to me. After four years of serious thought, I chose to convert. I genuinely believed this to be the right path for me, but it still involved a leap of faith. Breaking with the religion of my upbringing was not easy out of loyalty to my family. I studied with our Rabbi for a year in preparation then I took that leap. I converted and got married. So really two leaps!

Now I am a Jew, established 1996, right? Well, it wasn't that simple for me. I lacked the accumulated experience of living a Jewish life and basic fundamental knowledge. So I still felt mostly alien and apart. At this point, Marc's time and energy went to Law School, and we lived states away from his parents. It wasn't until I had my first son in 2000, when it started to click and the desire for connection to the Jewish faith and people intensified. I had more than myself to think about, and I realized that *I* needed to take the initiative to feel like I belonged.

I went about doing just that. We moved after law school to California-closer to Marc's parents. During that time, I gravitated towards the idea of a Jewish preschool for our son, and I found Temple Adat Elohim through the warm and lovely Beryl Strauss. She welcomed me and my family, and cheered me on to make friendships. Not long after that, I met my best friends, and our son met his best friends.

My belonging meter was on the rise, and I was content for the most part. Then there would be the occasional hiccup. Not knowing the prayers. Everyone else is singing them, and I am not. Then there's my name. With a Christian first name like mine, the repetitive assumption of being a non-Jew by other congregants was increasingly bothersome. So I signed up for the B'nai Mitzvah class, determined to gain what I was lacking.

For the last two years, I have learned and struggled, struggled and learned, challenging myself on so many levels. Apart from what I was learning in class, I seriously contemplated changing my first name to my Hebrew name, time and again. I even thought about DNA tracing to find a blood link to the Jewish people through my Russian ancestors. I could do all of this-some things with a little trouble, others with more difficulty, but I could do it. It was all very tempting, and even encouraged by some. I continued to study, process and reflect. Frankly at times, I just churned. And I say, "Go Pepcid AC!"

Finally, at last, I was ready to learn *my* most important lesson.

By all accounts, I was "caught up". I was more official now. I had gained the

knowledge, read and chanted Hebrew-even surpassing my own ambitious expectations. So why did these feelings of Jewish inadequacy persist enough for me to want to change my name, and trace my roots? It makes no sense, and yet it does.

I had to step back and look at my life's bigger picture. All my life, I have had the Am I Good Enough theme running through it. Why would I believe my spiritual journey was immune from it? Clearly it wasn't. And while I'd like to kick my Am I Good Enough and approval seeking tendencies to the curb with a passion-now that I realize what's going on here; I had to respect that this has been an intrinsic part of who I am for such a long time. So I am closing the door on it, and may it rest in peace.

My epiphany goes like this: I do not need to change my name. My name, in fact, is symbolic of my spiritual journey. I don't need to trace my DNA, or even need the accumulation of vast amounts of Judaic knowledge, although I plan to be a lifetime student. I just don't **need** any of it to feel like I belong. That is the core of it. I belong to G-heart, mind, body, and soul. And here's the critical part -*I belong to myself*. I am a Jew. Even if others do not see me this way, I say what I am and live what I am and *that* is enough for me. ***I finally belong.***