

Pivotal Moments of My Life

My Bar Mitzvah was pivotal for years

I don't think I had ever been so nervous. My mouth was terribly dry, yet the palms of my hands were puddled with sweat. I had studied intensely for a whole year to prepare me for these next few hours. Would I stumble over the Hebrew I had studied so carefully? Would I remember my speech, the only part of my bar mitzvah I was to present in English?

I was about to become a "son of the commandment" through the ceremony that initiates a 13-year-old boy into the religious life of the Jewish community! I would be responsible to obey the Torah and all its accompanying codes of oral tradition. Quite a heavy responsibility for one who, in many ways, was still a child.

The rabbi called me forward to lead the shacharit, the morning service. I faced a frightening sea of faces. I imagined each person with a clipboard, waiting to evaluate my performance and turn in a score to some panel of judges. Not that there were any such clipboards or judges, but I was greatly concerned with doing well to please and impress everyone who had come to hear me.

Latecomers trickled in and the 1000 seat sanctuary was filling up quickly. Reassuring smiles of friends and relatives helped. Even my Spanish

teacher from school was there, along with the third-baseman for the Kansas City Athletics.

It was time to start. After a few minutes of canting the familiar melodies, my nervousness dissolved.

The Torah scroll, in its beautiful velvet cover, was removed from the ark. I led the congregation in the Sh'ma, "Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one." I reverently carried the Torah around the sanctuary for all the people to see and kiss.

Back on the bimah, my Torah reading went well. I felt happy to have some of my relatives up there with me, especially when it was my father's turn to recite one of the seven benedictions. I relaxed a bit more as I sang my Scripture portions; I chanted the musaf for the Sabbath. Then it was over and I sat down.

Afterwards, there was plenty of food and drink and merry-making. People congratulated me and wished me great success in the future. I felt good. It was over and I had done well; I could relax and enjoy being the guest of honor.

More family background

My father, Elic, was born in Kansas City in 1921. His parents came over from Russia/Poland. Dad grew up to be a salesman-not of one particular item, but of many. He knew how to make people want what he was

selling. He sold many products: stuffed toys, Papercraft Paper, or Niles and Moser Cigars-even Nelson Bibles for a time.

My mother, Helen (nee) Wolf, was born in 1922 in Kansas City. She and my father met on Yom Kippur in 1937. It was downstairs in the social hall of the synagogue, during services. My dad struck up a conversation with her using a line that could have been right out of a Gene Kelly movie. He snapped his fingers near her face, she turned, and he said, "Thanks. I wanted to see the face that went with those legs." Dad was Orthodox and Mom usually attended a Reform temple. However, to honor the family on the High Holidays, she and her mother always went to the Orthodox shul along with Mom's maternal grandmother. They all sat upstairs with the other women, but now and then, my mother went downstairs where the teens socialized.

Mom and Dad married in June, 1942. Dad served in the Navy in World War II. He was in Pearl Harbor just after December 7, 1941 on the USS Wharton, rescuing women and children and delivering them to safety after the attack. Later he served in Europe (Italy, Southern France) and Northern Africa, as well as Alaska and the islands of Macon and Tarawa. Finally, in 1945 he was stationed in Norfolk, Virginia, which is where he and my mother were living when my brother Michael was born that same year.

Mom died on 4 April 2004 and Dad followed her in February 2005.

Michael was a salesman too; he worked with my dad for years. Then he finished as a pasta maker for an Italian restaurant in Kansas City. Michael passed in March 2014. My sister Judy, born in 1948, still lives in KC and retired after decades selling advertising for the Kansas City weekly Jewish newspaper. She also worked at the Welcome Center at Hallmark Cards. Now she's a volunteer for political causes and to support the local theatre scene in KC.

How did I become a believer in Jesus?

After all, I always took my Judaism very seriously.

Being Jewish was always a fact of life for me. My mother worked at the synagogue in the office, taught kindergarten in the Sunday school, coached our synagogue youth group's musicals and dramas and was president of the Marcella Rodin Auxilliary for volunteers.

Attending synagogue, celebrating holidays at home-this was the norm as far back as I can remember. I bowled with Jewish kids, played basketball with Jewish friends and learned about our people in Hebrew school. I never questioned my Jewish identity. The culinary side of that identity was nurtured by regular visits to both our grandmothers' houses. My dad's mom, Bubbe, used to make her own ground horseradish and pickles-the latter she kept in brine out on her porch. Bubbe also made delicious apple strudel. My mother's mom, Grandma Bessie, was not so "old world" but still, she was definitively Jewish. I don't remember her cooking so many traditional dishes, but she loved to feed us and always

brought banana cream pies to family dinners.

But being Jewish was more than a familial identity for me. It was a calling. My Zayde died when I was 7 in March 1959, so I had little if any relationship with him.

Whereas some boys tolerated Hebrew school, I was devout. Part of my devotion, I suppose, was due to the fact that I could excel. Cognitive learning always came easily to me. Much of Hebrew school was a test of cognitive skills, so I did well. Doing well mattered to me, and in Judaism I found my niche. Encouragement from the rabbis was also key. I wanted their approval and they bestowed it generously.

I was recognized as a spiritual leader in my youth group and during the afternoons, when I went to Hebrew school, I led the Minchah and Ma'ariv services.

I was bar mitzvah on 31 October 1964 and finished Hebrew school in 1966. I was very involved in our youth group, SYO (Synagogue Youth Organization). SYO was a Midwest regional subsidiary of the National Conference of Synagogue Youth (NCSY), the Orthodox youth movement. I was the local vice president, editor of our regular newspaper and member of the regional planning committee for conferences.

In 1966, the national organization of Boy Scouts was looking for a good Jewish experience to report for their magazine and someone at my synagogue suggested me. I guess I was the all-American Midwestern Jew-the magazine published an article about me with photos, which added to my high profile in our community.

I conducted the morning prayer services on special Shabbats. I davened quickly and got better and faster as I grew. When I led the Shabbat services, there would have been upwards of 300 people. Feelings? Pride that I could do so well. Spiritual thoughts? None . . .

My prayers were institutional. Yes, I believed that God was a wonderful Being. I believed he was real because that's what we (Jewish people) believe. That was all I knew. At that time, I would have said that God was not knowable. He was not personal. He just was. I gave up talking to God early on, having noticed that the few prayers I offered up never came to pass. Maybe, I thought, God had not answered in a personal way because so many people were talking to him about so much all the time. Maybe he took our prayers 'under advisement.' In any case, I grew up with the motto, *Qué será, será*, what will be will be, and don't expect God to do much about it. Though I didn't talk much to God, I did talk with others about him-and concluded that God was big and important and well, Other. And there was something of that mystique to the religion of Judaism.

Even though I was officially a "son of the commandment" at 13, it was not until three years later that I became serious about observing it. It was summer. I went to youth camp in Wild Rose, Wisconsin and there encountered Jimmy. He was a man from New York City, a ba'al teshuva who came to work as a volunteer at Camp Moshava. He confronted me with my compromises and challenged me to live a more orthopractic

life. I had always been proud to be Jewish. There was some mystique to all these do's and don'ts that were supposed to improve me as a person and, in particular, as a Jew. The fact that my parents were less observant than I felt they should have been made it all the more attractive. Sixteen-year-olds generally feel they know more than their parents, and here was an opportunity for me to be different from them and have something of my own while intensifying something that had always been important to me-my Jewishness. So I returned from camp very enthused about my religion.

I was fervent, not so much about God, but about "doing" Judaism correctly. Indirectly, my observance was connected to God since I was fairly certain that he existed, and that he had commanded us Jews to do certain mitzvot. It was my job, as a Jew, to observe these commands and comply. I figured that even if there were no God, it couldn't hurt to comply. And because compromise was a very bad word in my youthful understandings, and because I saw only absolutes, I stopped eating out with my parents and stopped attending their synagogue. I couldn't eat kosher food at home and non-kosher food when we went out. I couldn't drive to synagogue and park a block away and pretend to walk. I walked all the way to a different, closer synagogue, Ohev Yisrael. As far as I was concerned, my devotion had to be 100%-or nothing.

When I went to university (Washington University in St. Louis), I found a way to continue my Jewish education: I gave the rabbi's son guitar

lessons in exchange for lessons in religion from his father (Rabbi Polin). I enjoyed persuading others to be more frum as well, bringing friends with me to learn from the rabbi. Several of us laid tefillin each morning.

My concept of God didn't change, but my understanding of his demands on our lives did. God still was big and other, but now I felt like I was keeping more of the rules. Observance tends to make one feel holier. At least it worked that way for me.

Yet hard as I tried, I always seemed to fall short; there was always something more to do, or not do. My efforts never seemed good enough. There was always something missing in my efforts to please God. He seemed so insatiable. The road to being a good Jew was very long and seemed to be lined with more books than the shelves at the 42nd Street Library could hold. The ruach (spirit) we longed to experience in the songfests was never quite enough to fill us (although it did exhaust us). Nothing was ever enough. There was always more learning, more kavanah (devotion), more attention to minutiae, more people to bring in, more kindnesses to extend, more stories to memorize.

One Friday night, I had an experience that may seem silly or small but it was the beginning of a great change. I had attended the erev Shabbat services at Tiferes Israel- Chevra Kadisha in University City (the Delmar Loop), suburban St. Louis. The rabbi had been teaching me personally for months. It was an enjoyable night with good conversation and personal attention from the rabbi. But when I came home, I had a

problem. Neil, my Shabbos goy (the gentile who took care of details I couldn't attend to during the 25 hours of Sabbath-like turning my lights on and off) was gone. He had left for a party-and had left me in the proverbial lurch. There I was in Eliot Hall, the men's high rise (which has long since gone co-ed), and the bright overhead light was shining in my face as I lay down for the night. I said my prayers. I almost asked God to bring one of the other Jewish students in our dorm who were not as observant and might have turned off the light for me. But I didn't ask, and as a religious Jew I could not ignite or shut it off according to the rabbinic interpretation of the Scripture. What a dilemma. What was I to do?

After about 30 minutes of arguing with God "Tevye-style" (remember Fiddler on the Roof?), I got up and shut off the light. I felt horrible. I'd just broken a commandment-on purpose! How could I go to synagogue the next day without feeling like a hypocrite?

I didn't go back to services the next morning; I felt too guilty. The rabbi called a few days later to inquire after me. I told him some things were changing and I wouldn't be back for a while. He didn't know my shame. I couldn't disclose these things to him. What would he think of me if I did?

My disillusionment with myself eventually evolved into a disillusionment with "the system." School and religion-arenas which had once been a source for much of my self esteem-lost their luster.