

BAILEY BLOOM: MY JEWISH LIFE

Temple Sinai, Saratoga Springs, NY

Celebrating 83 years – the time of a Second Bar/Bat Mitzvah

August 10, 2019

Parshat Dvarim

First thanks to Ron Maenza, who with Karyl is visiting his daughter in Seattle this week, for inspiring me to finally do this.

And of course, a big thank you to the Rabbis, who encouraged me to take it on, even though the time was very short.

All my grandparents left Europe for Toronto, Canada in the early 1900's, long before the first World War. I was born in Toronto on August 29, 1936, into a family of immigrants in a community of immigrants, many of them Jewish.

My father's family name was originally Eisikovitch (son of Isaac), then shortened to Iscovitz, and finally Iscove. He came to Canada at the age of 8 in 1911 with his mother and two younger sisters, from the small Polish town of Apt, in Yiddish, or Apotov, in Polish. His father's family lived in Apt; his mother, however, came from Radom, a real city. My grandfather, of course, had immigrated earlier, and like so many before and after him, had worked until he had money to send for his family. There were eventually nine children, of whom my father was the oldest.

My mother's family, named Harnick, came from the area in and around Czernowitz, a good sized city in Romania, which was then part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. (My grandmother Gittel was an admirer of the Emperor Franz Yoseph.) After she was married at 16, she moved to live with my grandfather Moishe's parents in the small town of Vizhnitz nearby. My mother was the third of what would be seven children, and she was very proud that she was the first to be born in Canada, in 1908.

My parents' was something of a mixed marriage, he a Polish Jew, she a Romanian, at a time among the immigrants when such differences mattered. He graduated from medical school in 1929, and they were married on December 27th, just after the stock market crashed. Not a good time to be setting up a household and starting a medical practice. So they moved into her parents' home, a large three-story house my grandfather had built. It had six bedrooms and one bathroom! And at that time, four of my mother's younger siblings, three brothers and her sister, were still living there! (Her older sister had died.) Quite a houseful of Harnicks for my father to adjust to, in addition to being a new doctor and newly married.

My grandfather Moishe Harnick was a pious, scholarly man, Orthodox, but not rigidly so. He wanted to see to it that his four sons would study and learn the traditions of their faith, so they could carry it on as generations before them had done. He sent them to study with a Rabbi Gordon in Toronto, where they became knowledgeable and skilled davenners – all except one, who rebelled and eventually left Toronto. My mother's brothers could all daven a seder faster than anyone else we knew. And they had the best melodies for the seder songs. They davened at breakneck speed, but we always went through the entire seder, and sang all the songs at the end with great gusto.

I never knew my Zaida Moishe. He died of a stroke in his fifties in 1934, two years before I was born, but his legacy of respect for the tradition lived on in that house where I grew up. Of course, it was kosher. Most Jewish homes were, in that community at that time. Every week, Shabbas was honored with candles and challah and a shabbas dinner, attended by those living in the house, and later, their wives as well. My mother's oldest brother Iz (Israel) lived in Buffalo, and my maternal aunt moved to Buffalo after she was married, so it was only two of my uncles who were around all the time in my teenage years. But my aunt and her husband, and Uncle Iz and his wife would sometimes join us for seder in Toronto.

For every holiday, my grandmother Gittel made special foods. She had learned to be a wonderful baker from her mother-in-law Bayla, after whom I'm named. I remember the enticing smells that greeted me when I came home from school on Shabbas and erev yom tov. In addition to the regular Shabbas chicken soup with kneidlach or kreplach, there was honey cake for Rosh Hashana, stuffed cabbage for Simchat Torah, hamantaschen and also a special treat she called fluden for Purim, sweet dairy yeast cinnamon babka for Shavuot, and for Passover and the seders, sponge cakes galore and many kinds of matza kugels to please the palates of the different ethnicities in the family – in addition to my father's Polish preference for sweeter and spicier, one of my uncles had married a Litvak - I can't remember what she liked, but I know it was there for her.

But what about religion, you ask? And my religious education, besides food? In the words of Hamlet: "Aye, there's the rub". My father was not a believer and belonged to no congregation, except for the little shtiebel the Apter Society maintained, which he attended sporadically. We lived in a richly Jewish neighborhood, where there were not only Jewish bakeries, butchers, and other merchants, but also many after school shules of various philosophies, where children went to learn Hebrew, Yiddish, Zionism, history and combinations thereof. But my father believed that for a bright child like me that was a waste of time. (Little did he know that one day I would marry a Rabbi!)

So I took piano lessons and didn't go to cheder.

My mother's family, the Harnicks, however, belonged to a large traditional conservative congregation, and that was where I went with my grandmother for the holidays. The building was large and beautiful, with gorgeous stained glass windows. There was a Rabbi and a Chazzan, both dressed in white robes and high special hats, and an impressive all-male choir. There I would sit with my Bubba and aunts, in the women's balcony, looking down on all the men and boys and relishing the pageantry of it all.

One day, my Bubba said, "Enough". She was going to teach me to read if nobody else would. So she sat me down with a Hebrew alphabet, and off we went: kometz Aleph oh, kometz Base boh, kometz Gimel goh, and on through the alphabet and all the vowels. After that, when I sat with her in the synagogue and she saw me looking around and not paying attention during the long High Holiday services, she would say, "Don't count the windows. Look in the book!"

That was all very well, but even though I could follow the Hebrew fairly well, I didn't know what it meant! Since the prayer book, or machzor, was set up with the Hebrew on the right page, and English on the left, I read the English so that I could know what was going on. I soon discovered, though, that understanding the words and comprehending the meaning were two different things.

Fast forward to the summer of 1955, when I met Bert Bloom at a camp 150 miles north of Toronto. The camp was secular, but all Jewish. I had just finished my second year at the University of Toronto; he was going into his fourth year at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. Marrying a rabbi was the last thing I was interested in, but we fell in love, and after I graduated and he was ordained, we were married on June 10, 1957, 62 years ago. Of course, it's a longer story than that, but time is short.

That was the beginning of my real Jewish education! And what an education it was! Sink or swim, I was a "Rebbitzin", not quite 21 years old, wandering in the desert far from home and family, in Nashville, Tennessee! And it was a hot desert, believe me, but a wonderful Jewish community in many ways.

Like the Israelites in our Torah portion, we did some further wandering in various other deserts, Chicago, Massachusetts. In 1968 we moved to the Capital District of New York. We have lived here for 51 years, first with Congregation Beth Emeth in Albany, then with Congregation Gates of Heaven in Schenectady, where Bert retired and became Emeritus, and now, here we are at Temple Sinai in Saratoga. Our promised land!

Everywhere we lived, how much I learned! Sitting in the congregation all those years, participating in services for so many Friday nights and Saturday mornings, High Holidays, Festivals, countless Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, weddings and funerals, listening to sermons and lectures, I became infused with a love for Judaism which I had always had, but now I found it clothed in substance and meaning.

I was blessed with the opportunity to hear and learn from some of the greatest teachers and scholars of those times. To name just a few: from the larger Jewish world: Abraham Joshua Heschel, Zalman Shechter, Elie Wiesel, and Emil Fackenheim, one of the world's foremost post-Holocaust philosophers. From the Reform movement: Eugene Borowitz, Samuel Sandmel, Roland Gittelsohn, Herman Schaalman, and his fellow refugee from Nazi Germany, Gunther Plaut, editor of our Reform Torah translation and commentary, which you hold in your hands at this moment. Twice in the 1960's we were in the charismatic presence of Martin Luther King, Jr., when he spoke at our Temple and at a Reform convention in Chicago. From each of them, I learned more and more about Judaism and about the struggle not only to understand life's meaning, but how to work to meet its challenges.

But my greatest teacher, the one from whom I learned the most, was my dear husband, who had come to Judaism and the Rabbinate with an enormous love for and knowledge of Yiddish culture, Yiddishkeit and Jewish history, which really meant western and middle eastern history because the Jews lived in so many places over the centuries. I always teased him about his propensity to give long answers to short questions. But his knowledge was so great, and his understanding of the complexities of Judaism and the forces of the world was so extensive, it was hard for him to boil things down to simple statements. Life is not simple. He taught and preached that Judaism is not simple, either. And always, he connected Jews and Judaism to the world we live in. From him I learned that we have to continually work, with all our intellect and commitment, to study and learn and understand, if we can, and not be satisfied with simple answers to complex questions.

From him also, I learned the importance of the Hebrew prophets' calls for justice ("Justice, justice shall you pursue"), and the Bible's repeated concern for the poor, the widow and the orphan (Remember the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt"). It's not enough to study. Even a great scholar like Heschel marched for civil rights with Martin Luther King, because we are obligated to apply Jewish teachings and values to the world we live in. This I have tried to do in my life, participating in both the Jewish and larger

communities in many ways everywhere we lived. At one point, I was going to so many meetings, I learned to crochet (left-handed) so I would have something productive to do with my hands while I sat.

So my Jewish life has been a long journey, not always through the desert, but with many challenges along the way, and many blessings, too. We made many wonderful friends, and of course we have three brilliant, talented children and their equally brilliant, talented spouses, and seven amazing grandchildren.

In my almost 83 years, I have had a lot of teachers, but the two who had the most influence on me, as I have said, were my maternal grandmother Gittel Harnick, and my husband - "many have done well, but you have surpassed them all". To them I will always be grateful.

Like the Israelites in the Deuteronomy passage we just read, I received a rich inheritance from my ancestors. Like them, I hope I have been able to pass it on to my heirs after me.