As many of you know, our mother isn’t Jewish. And yet, somehow we are still here, standing on the bima at TBZ. Clearly, something happened. So let’s backtrack.

When our parents got married, they made a promise to the rabbi who married them that they would raise their children Jewish. Our Jewish background became very different from that of most of our peers. Mom didn’t bring any Jewish traditions to the table and Dad brought an antagonism to the materialist values of the reform congregation he was exposed to in the suburban Philadelphia.

At home, we picked and chose our traditions. Our parents had committed to challah and candles on Friday nights and signing us up for Hebrew school. They were determined to give us the building blocks of a Jewish education and give us the choice to take or leave it from there. We had looked around at different communities but never found one where we really felt at home. When shul-shopping we came to TBZ and were first drawn to it because, as 10 year-old Zoe put it, “they can sing in tune.” But TBZ would become so much more than that. From our first days in the sanctuary, we fell in love. Although it wasn’t always easy, our love of the people, the community we create, and the music we sing made us feel like we belonged, without anyone questioning the validity of our, sometimes shaky, Jewish identities.

TBZ has allowed us to create and treasure our own unique set of Jewish traditions that we have been able to define for ourselves. We have made a tradition of calling family members when all of us are in the car on the way to Shabbat Nariyah. Of using the Chanukah tune every Shabbos, and of spending the whole day at services on the High Holidays, spending one service babysitting and the other in the sanctuary. Our traditions include playing with kids in the back of the service on Saturday mornings. And a bluegrass seder for the third night of Passover, in which we sing every song in the
traditional pesach service to a bluegrass tune like singing the order of the seder to the tune of Amazing Grace—it actually fits surprisingly well, complete with instruments and random breaks for jamming. And with Shabbat Nariya we have been able to bring music into the service. It has also allowed us to meet so many more wonderful people and have a spiritual experience in a big group.

We have begun to make our own choices, and sometimes they differ from our parents. Dad never comes to services, but we have made an effort to come every Shabbos (at least until I went off to college). We both try to come on smaller holidays, like Simchas Torah, which our Jewish grandmother didn’t even know existed!

And so our prayer is this; yehi ratzon milfanecha. May it be your will, O Yah to help us create our own definitions of who we are. May it be your will that we continue to redefine and recreate our traditions so that we define them instead of letting them define us. And finally, may it be your will that we find new meaning in our traditions.