

Personal Reflection

Gonzalo Escobar

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Buenos Dias Amigos, and G'mar Chatima Tova.

My name is Gonzalo. I have been a member of JRC since 1989. Some of you may remember us as the family who showed up every Friday night with two growing children. We often arrived late and were among the last to leave. As our kids matured, we spent more and more time with the Immigrant Justice Task Force and domestic labor issues. Now, as a grandparent, I am "Abuelito" always with my wife "Bubbe" and our grandchildren.

I come to you on this Day of Atonement to share a bit of my story, my experience at JRC and its connection to social justice.

I am a native of Guatemala, Central America—one of the most beautiful places on earth. It is the "Country of Volcanoes." Imagine a land of tree covered mountains and natural waterfalls that is green all year round. I remember Guatemala City, where I was born and raised as "The City of Eternal Spring" a city cradled between mountain tops that doesn't know winter or summer. My brother and I were raised by our mother in extremely sparse circumstances. In 1976, our living space was destroyed by an earthquake. At that time, with fellow psychology students of the National University, I went to damaged parts of the city to help victims. We worked alongside many dedicated religious people. This experience changed what had been my negative view of organized religion.

Sadly, the beauty of my country was not enough to shield it from outside forces. When I left in 1980, my country had become a dangerous place for peasants, workers and students. Impunity was very real. Soldiers, police, and paramilitary people could stick a gun in your back if they felt like it; people were "disappeared" and did not return. Reports of torture were typical. Many of my former professors and some of my friends were exiled, disappeared or killed.

In Chicago, my first job was a teaching job which led to other teaching jobs. I was teaching Spanish when I met my wife, Tina, a Jewish nurse, who wanted to speak Spanish with her patients. Although I was aware that Guatemala had been the first Latin American country to support the creation of Israel, I did not have a close relation to Jewish people. With a humble background, in my country, there had been no opportunity to meet Jewish people. This situation changed here as we did social justice work, and later when we joined JRC.

We wanted to expose our children to Guatemalan and Jewish culture, and this led us to JRC where a Guatemalan family was hosted in 1989. In 1999, when Ricky Byrdsong was killed in Skokie and orthodox Jews (and others) were shot, we went to a rally in Rogers Park. A Spanish language radio reporter interviewed me there. She asked me if I was Jewish. I answered, "Yes, I am." I think this is the first time I'd thought about becoming Jewish. We celebrated my conversion in 2014.

I have not always felt part of the group at JRC. Like other persons of color, I have sometimes been treated differently. For example, once, at High Holidays, I was asked to show my driver's license to enter this building while I could see others walking in with no problem. Regularly, someone assumes I am a visitor to the synagogue and comes to welcome me. Often, someone asks me about where I come from but then leaves me out of regular joking and conversation.

In spite of this, I have loved, laughed and cried at JRC—a place where we've mourned our parents, welcomed our grandchildren, prayed for the recovery of dear ones, and still join friends in pursuit of justice. I hope people will remember that it is painful to leave the place you love and begin life again in new and different ways. I would not want this any other way.

Have an easy fast.