

**Standing on their Shoulders**  
**170 years of Torah, Avodah and G'millut Chasadim**

Rabbi Mona Alfi  
Congregation B'nai Israel  
Erev Rosh HaShanah 2019

I am obsessed with the PBS series “Finding Your Roots.” If you haven’t seen it, it’s a program about celebrities discovering their family history. In every episode someone inevitably is brought to tears as some mystery about their past is finally revealed to them. And by the end of every episode someone says something like, “until now, I didn’t really know who I was.”

And every time someone says that, my heart breaks a little bit for them. I can’t imagine that I would be who I am if I hadn’t been raised on the stories of my family. And I don’t just mean just the recent stories of my parents and grandparents, or the stories about their parents and grandparents. I also mean being taught the Torah and Jewish history as my own personal family biography. These stories all shaped who I am and how I see my place in the larger world.

I was thinking about this last summer when I was in Prague. As a child my maternal grandmother would tell me stories about her maternal grandparents and great-grandparents who had lived in Prague. In fact my most prized possession is a mortar and pestle that has been handed down mother to daughter since my great-great-great grandmother who was an Orthodox Jew and a physician who lived in Prague in the mid 1800s. She used her mortar and pestle to grind medicine. When I was a child, on Friday afternoons I would use it to grind up the Kellogg’s cornflakes my grandmother used to coat her baked chicken for Shabbat. And as I would enthusiastically smash the cornflakes into dust, my grandmother would tell me the stories of each of the women who had owned the mortar and pestle, and the journey it had taken from Prague to Romania to Brooklyn to Southern California.

These stories helped shape me, it made me understand that I come from a family where women were expected to get an education, that we were encouraged to be feminists who spoke up and spoke out, and that we had the right to chose how we wanted to express our Judaism and how we wanted to live our lives.

These stories, both of my immediate family and of the Jewish people, has given me not only a sense of responsibility, but also of hope, and of resilience. When I look at my mortar and pestle, when I light my Chanukah menorah, when I bite into a hamentashen, or hear the sound of the shofar, I remember that I am from a long line of people who have struggled and prevailed, and struggled and prevailed, again and again and again, but who have also retained their optimism, their faith, and their sense of responsibility to make the world a better place.

There can be something deeply satisfying not only in knowing about how you came to be in recent generations, but also in understanding that the story of you began years before you were born. Because when you understand this, it can also help you understand that the “story of you” will continue far into the future as well.

It is this sense of connectedness, *dor l’dor* – generation to generation, that gives us strength in difficult times and a sense of perspective in the good times. It is this newly found sense of

connectedness and being part of a *particular* story that makes the people on the show “Finding Your Roots” cry, this feeling that they are part of something bigger than just themselves, about the idea that they are finally rooted in history.

And this is also how I feel every time I dive into the B’nai Israel archives and learn more about the extraordinary people who have been part of this congregation for the last 170 years. It reminds me that what we are doing *now*, is part of something much bigger than just those of us who are part of B’nai Israel *today*.

Just as we are dwelling in a physical and metaphorical house that was built by the generations that came before us, we have an obligation to not only maintain this house, but to strengthen it so it will still be standing for future generations.

By taking the time to tell our stories, again and again, just like we read the Torah year after year, we can better understand why we do what we do here. And when we do this, we will discover that when we speak up for refugees, when we care for the earth, when we collect food for the Downtown Food Pantry, when we reach out to our fellow members when they are ill or grieving the loss of a loved one, we do this because it is part of our congregation’s DNA. Whether we know the stories or not, the generations that came before us have shaped what this congregation does *now*.

Those generations not only deserve our respect, and our gratitude, but they deserve to be remembered and to be honored.

170 years ago this last spring, men and women started to stream into Sacramento from around the world, lured here by the Gold Rush. And amongst the many thousands who came here were a handful of Jews who would become the founders of B’nai Israel.

As I look around this room, I can not help but wonder what their thoughts would be if they were with us tonight.

What would they recognize as familiar? What would shock them? What would give them comfort and satisfaction in knowing that what they held dear was still a part of this sacred congregation?

I am sure that they would be surprised by our location, which to them would have seemed so far away from downtown. They would likely be surprised by the size of the Sanctuary, capable of seating so many people.

I’m sure they would wonder where the Rabbi and the Cantor were, and ask who are those impertinent women in the white robes standing at the upper bimah.

They would probably feel somewhat uncomfortable with the amount of English in the service, be conflicted about the choir, and be shocked by the fact that men and women were sitting side by side. And I’m sure that a few of them might be shushing some children.

But once they settled in and got comfortable, enjoyed the air-conditioning, and started paying attention, I’m sure they would appreciate that while some of the melodies are different, the

prayers we are praying are the same ones they were used to. And by the time we come to the President giving announcements, I'm sure they would feel at home.

Studies show that when children know where they come from, and know the stories of their families overcoming obstacles, they are better equipped to face life's difficulties.<sup>1</sup> They are better able to withstand life's hardships and they are more likely to have a belief that they can be resilient, just like their ancestors. It would stand to reason that if this is true for individuals, then the same could be true for communities as well.

Because after all, doesn't that sound like the essence of Judaism? Telling the stories of our ancestors, their struggles, their faith, their ability to ultimately persevere, and not only to survive but to thrive? These stories that we have told, generation after generation, have given us comfort, inspiration and purpose.

It does not matter if we are ethnically Jewish, or Jews by choice, or married into the Jewish family, we as a community trace our collective story back to Abraham and Sarah, and ultimately, to Creation itself and with that comes an understanding that we are all part of the larger family of humanity.

As our ancient relative King Solomon once said "there is nothing new under the sun."<sup>2</sup> Our personal struggles are not that different than that of our ancestors. So it stands to reason that if we know their stories, perhaps we don't have to start from scratch in trying to figure out how to live our lives in a way where we'll have a better ending. Perhaps we can learn from their mistakes as well as from their triumphs.

Through our very names we link ourselves with the generations that came before us reminding us as we go out into the world that we do not go through life by ourselves, but rather, we are fortified with the love and wisdom that has been passed down *dor l'dor* – from generation to generation.

Even the name of our temple, B'nai Israel, reminds us that whatever path took us to *this* place, whatever accent someone speaks with, whatever ethnic origin our names conjures up, when we enter *this* sacred space, we are *all* "B'nai Yisrael" – WE are the Children of Israel. And the name should remind us that we are not alone, but rather, we are but one branch in a larger family tree.

But we are not just a family, we are a family with a shared purpose, a shared destiny, and a shared history. A history that is worth remembering and celebrating.

Rabbi Andrea Weiss teaches that in the Bible we are commanded to both "*shamor v'zachor*" – to "guard" and to "remember", these two things go hand in hand, memory and doing. Because memory should motivate and inform our actions.

Our Sacramento ancestors were pragmatic pioneers – they had one foot planted in the land of dreams and ideals, and one foot planted in the harsh reality of the world we live in. On one hand

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2015/06/03/living/telling-kids-family-history-benefits-feat/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> Ecc. 1:9

they had the courage to go someplace new, but when they got there, when they got HERE, they knew they had to work *together* in order to do more than simply survive.

So much of what we have here, so much of what we take for granted in our congregation, is rooted in the actions and vision of earlier generations.

While the building we worship in is the 5<sup>th</sup> location that B'nai Israel has called home, our founders were the first Jews on the west coast to invest in a synagogue building, and put down roots at a time when others were simply passing through on their quest to strike it rich.

But once they got here they didn't forget where they came from, they didn't forget the struggles they had gone through just to get here. This is why the work we do here doesn't just look inward, but also out towards the world. Before our founders built our temple, they founded a Jewish cemetery and a Jewish benevolent society to help those who were struggling and to comfort those who were grieving.

On many of the older headstones at Home of Peace, you will see engraved the names of the countries from where our founders had come from, a reminder to the generations who would come after them that we were founded by refugees and immigrants.

If you look at our history, you begin to see how our members were often involved in the forefront of society, how engaged we have always been in the larger community. The man who challenged the Blue Laws, the laws that forced businesses to close on the Christian Sabbath, was a member of our temple. He challenged the laws as being unfair. The case went to the California Supreme Court. And he won, allowing Jewish owned business to survive.

The first temple Sisterhood in the U.S. was founded by our rebbitzin, Carrie Obendorfer Simon here in Sacramento at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She went on to found the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, now known as the WRJ, or the Women of Reform Judaism.

And then there was Ray Frank, known as the Girl Rabbi of the Golden West. While she was never ordained, she was a student at the Hebrew Union College and she preached up and down the West Coast, from San Diego to Canada. Ray Frank graduated from Sac High in 1879, and she and her family were members of our congregation when she was in high school.

The person who challenged the Sutter Club as being an all white Christian club, and was the first Jew to become a member of the Sutter Club, was Dalton Feldstein, not only a member of our congregation, but a Past President as well.

And Mayor Steinberg is actually the 3<sup>rd</sup> member of our congregation to be the Mayor of Sacramento, the first one was Bernard Steinman in 1893.

As for social justice work. That has always been a part of who we are. From sending money to support the Jewish community in Israel as early as the 1850s, to helping Russian victims of a natural disaster in the 1800s, to reaching out to and helping Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s, helping those in need here and abroad is just what we do.

In fact, if you looked at any of the social justice work that we are currently engaged in, you will find that our members and our congregation have been involved in these issues in some form or another not only in the last century, but oftentimes in the century before it as well.

More precious to us than gold is engaging in *tikkun olam*, and that is truly the rich legacy that has been handed down to us from our founders to this very day.

For 170 years the members of B'nai Israel have put *Torah, Avodah and G'milut Chasadim* at the center of our community. *Torah* - study, *Avodah* - worship, and *G'milut Chasadim* - acts of loving kindness, these are the three pillars that have not only inspired what we do, but have strengthened who we are.

The story of the Jewish people begins as a story of going west, west out of Eden, west to the Promised Land, and then exile after exile, finally bringing either us or our families to the farthest west, to our beloved California.

In celebration of our 170<sup>th</sup> anniversary, our member Mary Sorrels created two magnificent windows that now hang in our Heritage Hall. The eastern window depicts Jerusalem, and on the Western side, Sacramento. The Jewish people have journeyed from the City of Gold to the Golden State, and have made so many stops along the way. These windows honor that journey.

I often marvel at what courage it took for *each* generation to pick up and move, over and over again. Learning new languages, new customs, always trying to fit in, to create a community to raise their families with, and to build a better future for the next generation, finding within themselves an eternal optimism that one day they would find the Promised Land. Our story, the story of the Jewish people, is one of learning how to adapt while still staying true to our core beliefs, traditions and practices.

There is so much for us to learn about resilience, about faith, and even about ourselves when we take the time to learn about the generations that have called themselves members of this congregation. And I wonder, if we take the time to learn these stories, will it remind us of the importance of our living our lives with greater intentionality so that those who come after us will remember *us* with a sense of gratitude and appreciation?

Every High Holiday season we are given the gift to write a new chapter in our collective Book of Life, a new opportunity to write the story we want to be remembered for.

5780 is the 170<sup>th</sup> chapter in the Sacramento's Jewish community's Book of Life.

This year, let us all take the time not only to study together, to worship together, and engage in acts of love and kindness together, but let us also come together to celebrate the chapters of our collective history that were written by those who came before us, just as we pray that future generations will see our deeds as worthy of remembrance and celebrating as well.

Blessed is the Holy One, the Creator of all humanity, who has given us life, who has sustained us, and who has brought us to this joyous time.