



Congregation Beth El

High Holy Days 5782

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Jewish Journey through the lense of Belonging

I am so grateful to be here. Here as in still alive in this pandemic. Here as in standing here speaking to you. Here as in among you, my people and our completely awesome community.

Some of you know me from the many years I have been lurking around Beth El attending services with friends, celebrating holidays and life events. Some of you know me only since I have become a formal and active member of the congregation a few years ago.

I grew up in a working-class Catholic family – my parents came here from Louisiana in the African American migration of the 1950s. Although I struggled to maintain my Catholic identity and faith, ultimately I was not able to reconcile Jesus' message of charity and love with the politics of the church. I studied Buddhism through the teaching of Thich Nhat Hanh. I thought I was seeking truth. In fact what I was seeking was a community that combined spiritual practice with intellectual pursuit and social action. I found that in Reform Judaism.

Despite being raised as an atheist, my husband, Greg, was loud and proud in his Jewish heritage. Greg's father escaped the Ukraine as a child and with his family made the arduous journey to America. His

family story moved me, and harkened to my own family history of slavery and liberation. I proudly took his name so we would be recognized as a Jewish family. We kept to basic dietary laws and celebrated Hanukkah and Winter Solstice (no Christmas). Although he would occasionally accompany me here, he had no interest in joining a congregation.

Greg and I moved to the tiny town of Forest Grove Oregon in 2016 to be near our grandchildren. Sadly, Greg died of cancer in 2018 and our son left to pursue work in Las Vegas. Now alone and faced with the question of where and how to live my life (my one wild and precious life as Rabbi Becca quoted Mary Oliver last night) I was drawn back to the Bay Area. It didn't take me very long to figure out that I couldn't go this alone. I came here seeking community with family, friends and in this congregation I had been circling for so long.

I was warmly welcomed here as I explored Judaism and discovered all the ways that our rituals and practices are deeply rooted in welcoming and community. All of what I was looking for was here: spiritual life, ongoing intellectual dialogue and a strong culture of sharing, social justice and generosity. I was home again.

Although I have been living Jewishly for many years, I just made my formal conversion in early 2021. Yes, it was in the middle of the pandemic. In this time of uncertainty, I didn't want to wait. It was a truly pandemic style conversion – I completed my Introduction to Judaism classes online. My Beit Din was via Zoom. The clergy arranged

for my mikveh in a hot tub (in Marin, of course) from which I emerged triumphantly Jewish.

I recently joined the Life Stories writing group here at Beth El. Usually we write prose, but were challenged recently to write a poem. Here is what I shared:

Poem on the Occasion of Joining a Tribe

I have circled this campfire
For so long and felt the warmth
Of your gathered tribe

Yet I have been just outside the circle of light
I have been just outside the circle of warmth

As I step forward I bring my own log for the fire
So that I may begin to give as well as to receive
So that I have truly brought my entire self to this circle
So that I am at last one with this our gathered tribe

And a chant goes up
in a language I don't yet understand
Still it pierces my heart with joy

And somehow I find myself
able to sing along just fine