



Rosh HaShanah AM Late Service 5783/2022

Susan Sugarman

Shana tova!

When I was growing up in St Louis, being Jewish felt special, but also kind of embarrassing—somehow associated with scratchy petticoats, lace- trimmed socks and patten leather shoes.

My first memory of Rosh Hashanah is from third grade, where I'm the only Jew—and the only one dressed in party clothes. Mid-morning my teacher sends me to the office, and my mom picks me up to go to Temple. After services, there's a traditional holiday lunch—a cheeseburger and a milk shake—then back to school for the rest of the day.

At that time in Missouri, we said the Lord's Prayer to start each school day. In our home, we had a Christmas tree during Hanukkah and Easter baskets during Passover. Everyone in my family and all my ancestors were jewish, my great-uncle was a rabbi, and my great-great grandfather was a torah scribe....
...I was SO confused about what it meant to be a Jew.

Our temple, Emanuel, was strictly assimilationist. No one was allowed to wear a tallit or a kippah, or to even to teach Hebrew. Neither girls nor boys became b'nai mitzvah.

God of the Union Prayerbook was king, ruler, judge, and patriarch. To me God seemed very demanding and sometimes scary, kind of like my own father.

I was an anxious child who yearned for approval and belonging, but I didn't find it in a Jewish setting.

Luckily, I found another place where all kids felt safe:
Mr. Rogers Neighborhood.
Most of you know Fred Rogers from public television. He was a musician, a presbyterian minister, and my first spiritual teacher.



And here's why:

Mr. Rogers was curious. He spoke softly, listened carefully, and didn't shy away from difficult topics.

He helped vulnerable people be seen and heard.

He taught us about loving—in action and song.

🎵 There are many ways to say I love you, there are many ways to say I care about you.

When we were very young, my mother put us to sleep with Mr. Rogers' bedtime prayer:

🎵 Keep us safe and happy God, tell us what to do,
good night god and thank you god for letting us love you.

Fred Rogers offered a loving god, a god of blessings and forgiveness.

Fast forward to me as a shy, nerdy teenager. I joined Jewish youth group and fell in love with a sweet, guitar-strumming boy, who later became a rabbi.

Prayer was tuneful, joyous, and comforting.

For the first time it felt really good to be Jewish.

Then, as a young adult, I was a distracted, wandering Jew. Luckily my wandering took me to an Israeli folk dance class where I met Paul, my beloved husband. And it's thanks to Paul and his commitment to synagogue life, that we joined Beth El—43 years ago!

I was active in Sisterhood.

Our chavurah became extended family.

We donated.

If I had a Jewish purpose during those early decades, it was to be a good wife and to make sure our children got a more meaningful Jewish education than I had.



Now my kids are grown and I'm a Savta—a Jewish grandmother to 7 awesome grandchildren who have led me to my true purpose as a Jew.

My Jewish purpose is to love—to give and receive love.

We bake challah, light candles, sing blessings, decorate a sukkah, and act out the Exodus. Infusing each observance is the love—love of family, love of community, and my personal love of Jewish tradition.

At age 60, I joined the adult b'nai mitzvah class.

Now I had new goals:

to help lead a service, to chant a few verses of torah.

As I studied our shabbat morning siddur, I met a god who was kind and generous, very different than demanding God of my first High Holy Days.

After my Bat Mitzvah, I was ready for more adult roles:

These days, I facilitate Wise Aging groups,

I serve on the Connections Committee.

I've befriended a refugee family from Afghanistan

thanks to our Welcome the Stranger circle.

And I'm involved in renewing Beth El's Chevra Kadisha

to support each other through serious illness, end of life, and bereavement.

Behind each of these activities is my Jewish purpose:

the purpose of loving.

In the early weeks of COVID,

I volunteered to phone older Beth El members who might be especially isolated during that tough time. When I saw list of people to receive calls,

I was startled by two names: Paul and Susan Sugarman.

It's true. We are old and vulnerable.

In the foreseeable future our names will be on kaddish lists.

Recently I've been awake at night with existential worries.

.....I struggle to accept the losses that are a natural part of aging.

So I'm learning again to pray—I pray for healing, for strength, for peace.



I don't know if my prayers are received by a loving god.

I do know that when I stay true to my purpose— intent on giving and receiving love, I'm calmer, happier, more patient and grateful.

In short, I'm a better person.

And for me, that's what being Jewish is all about.