

My Jewish Journey

My Jewish journey began when my Great-grandfather Abraham Meltzer had me named at Agudas Achim, a Synagogue where a few years later my future husband, Sheldon Solovy, would have his Bar Mitzvah. I didn't grow up in Jewish neighborhoods. When, at age six, I started singing "Jesus Loves Me," my Mother immediately went to a jeweler in Logan Square and bought me a beautiful marquise and sterling Star of David.

I faced physical antisemitism in the grammar school I attended. When my parents were going to buy a house, they looked at one in that same school district. I thought, "You can buy that house, but I won't go to that school. I'll run away." Fortunately, they did not buy that house, and fortunately my experience in the next school was quite different.

The first day I was in the new school, the boy in front of me turned around and asked, "Are you Jewish or Catholic?"

I thought, "here it comes again." Proudly I raised my head and said, "I'm Jewish."

He thought a minute and then said, "Okay, you can be everybody's friend."

My two best friends, still friends today, were Catholic and Jewish. At the wake for the Mother of one, my friend's husband looked at us and said, "The Three Musketeers."

Another friend was the daughter of a liquor salesman. One day, playing with her, she said that one of her father's customers gave him a Jewish record and they were going to give it to me. She played it on her little phonograph. I was absolutely blown away. That was the first time I heard Kol Nidre. I said that it was beautiful.

When I came home, and mentioned it at the dinner table, my Father told me that it was Kol Nidre, a very old Jewish melody. The next day when I went back to my friend she said that when she told her parents about my reaction, they played the record. Then they decided to keep it.

The closest Synagogue for us when I started Sunday school was Temple Beth El in Logan Square. When they had the older kids go on Saturday, I unhappily gave up ballet. Of course, as an adult now, I agree that my parents made the right decision. Sunday school provided most of my contact with other Jewish kids. When I was 13, I rebelled. I had enough of school during the week, I wasn't going to religious school any more. The following year would have been Confirmation. I began to think if I didn't go back and get Confirmed, I might regret it later, so I returned. We had an open house party later, and the thing I remember most was meeting a Great-Uncle I hadn't met before. Once, when he was in his 90's and my kids were little he was over for lunch. He picked them up and swung them around as I stood there amazed at his strength.

My husband's sister was married at Temple Menorah. We had gotten engaged the night before, but weren't going to say anything on Susan's big day. I came late because my sister graduated that Sunday and we had company, so I showed up as the wedding dinner was ending. What an eventful weekend! At the end of the wedding, I went back with Shel's family to their home before he took me home. Without knowing we were already engaged, my future Father-in-law handed me a centerpiece from one of the tables and said, "To the next Solovy bride." I was shocked. How did he know?

When Melissa was born a few years later, she was named at Temple Menorah. She was three weeks old and a cousin babysat with her while Shel and I attended the Service. When Aileen was born, she was named for my beloved brother Arthur. I didn't go to the naming. When Shel came home, he said it was good that I didn't go because he felt it would have really gotten to me.

For awhile we were at Temple Beth El. I was on the Sunday school board. Melissa had her Bat Mitzvah there. I was so nervous about the whole thing and the party the next day that I had a two day headache.

Then for awhile, we were back at Menorah. I chaired a Sunday school fundraising committee and we raised a thousand dollars. Melissa was confirmed there and Aileen had her Bat Mitzvah there.

When Aileen went to Olin Sang for a session one summer, she met Rabbi Weinberg and was very impressed. We lived only a few blocks away from Beth Israel, so we decided to check it out. We joined. Aileen was confirmed at Beth Israel. I've been a Temple Beth Israel member for more than thirty years. Rabbi Weinberg officiated at both daughters' weddings. My Grandsons' Brises were at Temple. (I did the Gramma thing—I sat in a corner and cried.)

Shortly after we joined, Shel started getting sick. It would turn out to be sclerosing cholangitis, a liver disease that's probably genetic. The only remedy is a liver transplant. Before a transplant, there are several tests to see if someone can withstand a transplant. On the last day of testing, I was a wreck and trying not to show it. I knew something was going to be wrong, and of course, I was proven right. He had two blocked arteries. He had shoveled snow that morning.

Shel had open heart surgery performed by the surgeon who was a brother of the man who fixed the Hubble telescope in space. Before he had the surgery, we were given the odds, which weren't as good as they would have been if he didn't have the liver problem. The girls and I were with a nurse when we were told those odds. My girls got hysterical and I wasn't much better. Even the nurse had tears.

We were blessed that Shel survived both surgeries and went on to living a very normal life. Our next door neighbor belonged to a Traditional Synagogue. He asked me if I would like them to say the Meshechbarach at his Synagogue. I didn't know what that was and he explained. I said yes. When I mentioned it to Rabbi Weinberg, he said, "We could do that here." I truly believed those prayers got my wonderful husband through his medical crises.

Shel soon joined the Temple choir and had many nice moments with them. I had the benefit of hearing him sing and of getting to go to the Choir parties.

Originally, we attended Friday night Services, intending to walk, but we usually had barely enough time to drive there. Then, as we got older, we started going on Saturday mornings.

When I had my book out, I participated in the Artisan Fair. It was a lot of fun and we sold books, a couple of photographs, and some of Melissa's jewelry. Unfortunately, I'm not a morning person, so, even though I enjoyed it, I don't think I could get there early enough to do it again.

There's a line in an old movie about "Nothing is forever—" Well, nineteen years after my husband had his liver transplant, he had many medical problems. I am grateful that Rabbi Weinberg visited him at each of his many hospitalizations. I appreciated his warmth and sense of humor. At one

visit he told Shel, "Next time I see you, I want to see you with your clothes on!" Our beautiful marriage of 43 years ended with Shel's death. The outpouring of love and caring from Temple is one of the things that keeps me going.

A year and four months before Shel passed away, my Mother passed away just a few days short of what would have been her 103d birthday. Rabbi Weinberg and my Sister's Rabbi shared the funeral Service. Shiva was at my Sister's home. The people who were supposed to help from my Daughter's Temple didn't come. As June and I started to set up, Rabbi Weinberg didn't want us doing it. Although we wouldn't stay out of the kitchen, Rabbi Weinberg pitched in and tried to talk us out of what we were doing.

I'm now part of TBI's writers' group. As part of our Temple's Centennial celebration we have been asked to write something. It is my privilege and honor to contribute this memoir. My Grandmother Meltzer used to say at birthday celebrations "Bis Hundert." May Temple Beth Israel have another hundred wonderful years.