

I grew up in the predominately Jewish neighborhood of South Shore on the city's south side in the 1950's and 1960's. My family belonged to a large conservative Congregation named B'nai Bezalel located at 76<sup>th</sup> and Phillips. Today, the old synagogue building is still standing, but is now an African-American church.

I remember the emphasis for Bar mitzvah students at Bnai Bezalel and other conservative shuls, was not only to learn to chant our assigned Torah and Haftorah portions but to also daven the entire Musaf service in front of the congregation. My parents were thrilled and kvelling that I was able to do so at my own Bar Mitzvah. I accomplished this by mostly memorizing, with the help of a tape recorder, for 4-6 months before my Bar Mitzvah. I never really understood what I was chanting and was never taught or encouraged to ask any questions about the meaning or understanding of the Hebrew words.

In 1969, 6 months after graduating college I married another south sider, Linda Fienberg, who was raised at a large Reform Temple, South Shore Temple at 73<sup>rd</sup> and Jeffery. Many disapproved of me entering into a mixed marriage... me, a conservative Jew and marrying Linda, a Reform Jew. 49 years later, we have 2 sons and 4 grandchildren we are still happily married to each other, proving that mixed marriages can work.

But I digress. Our two boys, Jason and Corey were born in 1971 and 1974, and by 1980 we joined TBI, located at Howard and Crawford, close to our home in Skokie. Our boys were ready to start Hebrew and Sunday school. Michael Lorge was the principal and we encouraged many of Jason and Corey's friends from East Prairie School to also join as members, including Allen Satyr, son of Marsha and Ira Satyr.

Jason and Corey went through their Bar Mitzvahs, and Confirmations here. They soon graduated college, married and started families of their own, but now far away from us, living in Dallas, Tx and Superior Co., near Denver.

Linda and I started to turn more and more to TBI to fulfill the next chapter in our lives. Linda has previously spoken to you about her history and continued participation with the catering committee since 1993.

I was appointed and later was elected to the temple board several times and worked on numerous committees and eventually served as chairman of the membership, adult education and other committees. Over the years I helped work on art auctions, temple bazaars, family retreats, and even organized a Road Rally. I became an original TBI player at our bi annual Purim shpiels. In 1990, I started attending the Rabbi's Sat. Morning Torah class on a regular basis, which continues today.

In 1995- 1997, I served as president of TBI, attended all services including every Bat and Bar Mitzvah, during my term. I met many renown Jewish guest speakers and learned a tremendous amount of Jewish knowledge from Rabbi Weinberg's weekly words of Torah.

On Sunday mornings, I helped Rhea Robin organize and teach the weekly TBI Torah 101 class. We made up study questions and lead the weekly discussions on the current Torah portions. We encouraged all who came, to freely express themselves, as we struggled to find answers. I soon realized I was studying the same texts and problems my ancestors had studied. Each class helped me to understand just what the Torah was trying to teach me.

In 1997, Linda and I went with Rabbi and Jody along with 35 other members of TBI on our first trip to Israel, an experience we still fondly talk about today. We visited and explored many historic places in Israel, which before, I had only read about.

This all brings me to my final thought about what I think is TBI'S greatest strength; about a program which exists here, but hardly anyone ever mentions.

I'm talking about our TBI Bnai Mitzvot Mentoring program, of which I am involved.

Our tradition teaches us that the whole world is allowed to exist because there are 36 "lamed vovniks" in every generation, (hidden righteous people, who lead, teach, and comfort) in the world. In TBI we also have a quiet dedicated group of almost 36 adult volunteers, who, like the "lamed vovniks", take the time to teach Bnai Mitzvah students their Torah portions, in ways the Rabbi, Lori and Marla can't do, due to their own time restraints.

We, as volunteer mentors search the web sites, consult with Rabbi Google, go to our own library for reference materials, and frequently discuss with Rabbi Weinberg, Lori or Marla, to make up our own study questions. We go over the provided Bar Mitzvah study guides. We try to provide a meaningful and memorable experience for each student. We hope they will continue to learn and to share what they have learned with others.

We meet at their homes, in our own homes, in the temple or any other agreeable spot, once a month for about 4-6 months before the Bar or Bat Mitzvah date. We teach, we learn, we share, we study and we struggle to find meaning, until we feel they can teach the congregation on their special Bar or Bat Mitzvah day. We empower them to feel

confident that their opinion and ideas on a Torah portion are just as valuable as the Rabbi's opinion and ideas. We try to help each student put in the effort with study, stimulating discussions and possible answers to their questions.

I have found that the most important common question, which often comes up in our discussions is, "Did this or that really occur? Can we prove that 10 plagues fell upon Egypt, that the Red Sea split, that a golden calf was made, that manna did really fall from the sky everyday for 40 years in the dessert, that God really did speak to Moses face to face?"

It is in these moments, where science cannot prove or disprove what happened to us over 3,000 years ago, as told to us in Torah. Here is where we get to talk about faith, a belief in something, when something cannot be proven. It really doesn't matter if it happened or not! Together, we are trying to understand and ascertain the meaning and the reason of each of these stories.

I wish I had a mentor when I was 13.

At TBI, the Rabbi reminds us that learning is a lifetime activity. As one of the mentors, I am giving back just a small part of what I have learned to the next generation. This only makes us stronger as a congregation and bodes well for our future.

Thanks to the Rabbi, Lori and Marla who have started and helped us maintain this unique mentoring program at TBI, over 10 years ago. Everyone associated with it appreciates the opportunity to both learn and teach. It is a lifelong endeavor, and I'm glad to be just a small part of it.

Shabbat Shalom