

My Spiritual Journey – Alan Levine – October 18, 2008

To know me at all is to know that I am rarely at a loss for words. And while I am extremely proud to be honoured by my community, this topic: my spiritual journey, my Jewish autobiography – has been quite intimidating.

Maybe its because in past years I've been privileged to listen to my fellow congregants moving stories of alienation and connection; rejection and return; trauma and triumph. Compared to them, my Jewish experience is both tame and kind of dull. Lastly, the word “spiritual” scared me a little bit. It seems to imply a mentality that is quite different than the one my extremely logical, truth seeking, explanation-driven mind generally employs.

When I was 13 years old and in the 7th grade, I decided to take a day off school by telling my mother that I was sick. Calling my bluff, she took me to the doctor. I figured the jig was up. So, imagine my surprise when the doctor declared that I had pneumonia. I often think of that incident as a metaphor for my life. No matter what I get involved with, I always seem to end up with a lot more than I bargained for. And mostly in a good way. So the current working title for my spiritual journey is “The Accidental Jew”

The Beginning

I grew up in New York, which was a very different experience than that of most Canadian Jews. On my father's side, I am 5th generation. On my mother's side, second. My father's family was very assimilated - although he did have the equivalent of a Tim Horton's drive through Bar Mitzvah. My mother came from an orthodox family. But as Americans, they were so committed to the “melting pot” that my grandmother – who kept a kosher home – objected strenuously to the name Aaron – because it was too Jewish. So I ended up, Alan.

To be Jewish in New York was to be mainstream. Most of the people on our block were Jewish. My classmates were Jewish. The mayor and other elected officials were often Jewish; the comedians were ALL Jewish. Even the people who weren't Jewish *sounded* Jewish. When I was a kid, there were more Jews in NY than there were in Israel.

We were members of the local Reform Temple. My childhood experience of Judaism, the religion, was mostly as an obligation. Hebrew school was rarely engaging and during services I spent my time calculating our page rate so I could extrapolate when we would finish.

Yet, I *liked* being Jewish. Shabbos was a little oasis of calm in our raucous household. Chanukah was joyous. Although Pesach consisted of my beloved, enlightened, college-educated grandfather turning into a mumbling unintelligible, Hebrew speed-reader, at least the food was good. However, the rest of the holidays were more notable for the time off they provided from school than anything else. Meanwhile, my parents were very connected to their community; they served on the board of our Temple; my father ultimately became President. He expanded the building. I ignored the process completely.

The first time I remember being enthusiastic about being a Jew was the Six Day War. I was 12 years old, a total history junky (I read all 15 volumes of the Golden Book history of the United States at least 3 times) and I had a new hero. Little Israel; humbling these huge populous enemies. I knew every weapon in the 1967 arsenal and every battle in the war. And I was proud to hear Abba Eban speaking so eloquently at the UN. We could beat anyone in a fight and then we could out-talk them too.

My Bar Mitzvah was.....un-meaningful. Born in the dead center of the baby boom, I ended up a *triple* Bar Mitzvah. I think they broke the maftir into 3 parts; we did not do a Dvar Torah.

And then I had my first “accidental Jewish” experience.

It was some casual comment from a friend saying that he was going on what the Reform Youth Movement (National federation of temple youth – NFTY.) called a “conclave” as he heard they were fun. My parents, who were not used to hearing positive comments from me about Jewish experiences (or about much else at that time) agreed to fund this weekend even though times were, as always, somewhat tight.

And what a revelation it was for me. People my age who thought Judaism was cool, exciting, intellectually stimulating and, dare I say it, spiritually meaningful. There was a lot of singing, discussion and engagement (kind of like Darchei Noam). Plus, there were *a lot* of cute girls who didn’t yet know I was such a nerd. (one girl was named Elyse Goldstein. I knew her when....)

I was asked to be President of my local youth group chapter. That was my first official leadership role. I liked it. It was challenging and fulfilling. I was introducing programming that the local kids had never seen before. And they liked it. I became a macher in LIFTY (the Long Island Federation of NFTY). All of the sudden, doing Jewish became the focal point of my non-school life.

Sometime while attending a LIFTY event, another one of life’s accidents occurred. One of the cool young teachers, told me about this really great – and really cheap – one year program in Israel. I had never given going to Israel a minute’s thought. But I desperately wanted to avoid going to “college” like all my friends who had already decided on careers in medicine and law. I wanted an adventure instead. And I thought my parents just might buy this Israel idea. So I applied to the program, got accepted, checked into deferring my admission to Swarthmore, and then told my parents. In hindsight, it is clear I should have mentioned my plans a little earlier - but my parents ultimately relented after some exchanges of views at high decibel levels.

Of the 90 kids from 10 countries who ended up on this program, I think it is fair to say that no one knew less about what they were getting into than I did. The program was for youth leaders from Zionist

organizations: Hashomer, Betar, Habonim, Young Judea and others. The objective was aliyah. I didn't know what that word meant when I arrived. I had never heard of ANY of those groups. The other kids seemed to know what Zionism was all about; and they had deep political arguments about the nature of the state. Honestly, I wasn't really clear on what they were arguing about. But, the classes were interesting. The other kids were fun. I met a cute girl named Iris. And Jerusalem was profoundly different than any place I had ever experienced. Of course, the furthest I had been from home before was Cleveland

One month after we arrived, the Yom Kippor war broke out. We spent time in air raid shelters. We read the meager news. We talked to Israelis fraught with worry over the fates of their husbands, fathers, brothers and sons. To help out, I collected garbage and played guitar in a folk band that toured hospitals where we visited the burn wards. My childhood romanticization of war was forever cured by the experience.

I felt an acute existential dilemma. 100's of millions of people wanted to destroy me, and the country I was living in - and I realized that I had no idea why.

So, I did a Jewish thing. I studied. I read Zionist philosophers such as Borochoy, Jabotinsky, Herzl and my favorite at the time, Ahad Ha'am. I discovered the richness of their competing visions of a Jewish future. After five months in Jerusalem, we moved to kibbutz. I continue to eat book after book with a focus on our history – now MY history. One day as I was reading Nora Levin's exhaustive and exhausting account of the Holocaust, I got to the story about Hannah Senesch, the famous female resistance organizer who parachuted into Hungary and was captured and killed by the Nazis. She did not drop into Eastern Europe alone – and Levin's book recounted the exploits of the rest of her team including Chaim Chermesh – according to Levin “a legend in Slovakia”. I knew a Chaim Chermesh. He worked in the chicken coops with me. Yes, he was the legend; a hero so humble he had no problem shoveling chicken crap. I felt like he had jumped out of the pages of history to prove to me

that ordinary people do extra-ordinary things. To prove to me just how real *my* Jewish history was.

By the end of that year in Israel, I felt connected to my Jewishness by thousands of years of history and dialectic leading us inevitably to the Zionist future I was experiencing. Inspired by Israeli agricultural and environmental ingenuity, I planned on saving the world by becoming an environmental engineer. And I met my life partner, Iris, who ultimately convinced me to come to Canada. All because I wanted to get out of going to college...

My early 20's were not very Jewish years. We attended shul during the high holidays. Believe it or not, I taught Sunday school. But the euphoria of my Jewish awakening in Israel was slowly buried beneath the life of an engineering student and then a corporate job. After a few years, I craved another adventure. I remain eternally grateful that, at a time when this was far from a common decision, Iris agreed to quit our jobs, put our meager possessions in storage and spend every dollar we had saved to travel the world for 20 months. It was one of the most amazing periods of my life. I was astounded by the huge differences - and the compelling similarities - of the lifestyles and people that we encountered. Almost every day brought a new and meaningful experience. We enjoyed something close to total freedom - which has its own qualities both positive and discomfiting. How fortunate I feel to have had this life altering experience. And how fortunate I am to be able to have shared it with my life partner.

We returned from travel and after 2 years, I quit my job again; this time to start a business. And while my 20 years of business had little to do with Judaism it did take me on a rather enlightening journey of its own.

For the first time in my life, I had regular contact with many working class people; minorities and many immigrants. Their dignity and ambition for their children, despite their disadvantaged position in our society, regularly moved me. I increasingly learned to respect the

thoughts and ideas of people who were different than myself – who weren't as educated, or who just processed information differently. I learned to accept the pressure and challenge of hundreds of people depending on me. I learned how incredibly thin the line is between being a genius and being an idiot – because our bank, alternately, declared to be both. Most of all, I learned how to lead, and how fulfilling it is to lead, a team of people you care about to achieve a common vision. Skills that would come in handy later on.

Meanwhile, we were raising our family and I took immense pleasure from every phase of it. But if Iris had not been my partner, I might have been content to be peripherally Jewish. However, Iris brought us to DN and got involved while I stayed on the sidelines; babysitting while she went to Board Meetings. I appreciated the spirit of the place but rarely attended. Slowly, however, I was drawn in. Our dear friends David & Debbie included us in annual Seders that were imaginative and stimulating. They co-lead the regular monthly, if sparsely attended, Friday night services. Dave's guitar playing brought me back to my youth group days. The families who came on Friday nights bonded.

Other DN friends of Iris invited us to join a monthly Chavurah. 15 years later, they are our extended family.

Fundraising and the community

Finally, Iris suggested that it was time I did *something* for the community and that Rabbi Pinsker had an idea. He asked me if I thought we could raise the money to build a home of our own. He didn't know me very well. He couldn't have known that asking me to do something outrageously ambitious; something that I had never done before was exactly the way to engage me. That, and the fact that, like my visit to the doctor, I had no idea what I was getting into.

The work started off slowly. A consultant's study. Years of operating fundraising to stabilize the finances. Evolving our culture. Joining the Board. Building a team. And, as a benefit, a widening social circle of

the people I worked with. My appreciation for the tremendous intellectual depth in our community; for the passion of our committed members who sustain us through their efforts, and for our values of egalitarianism and openness - grew. My feeling of being a part of something meaningful grew. Still, I sometimes felt embarrassed that my spirit was nurtured more by DN activities that took place outside the sanctuary rather than in it.

I remember a day of visioning (in my company's cafeteria) about our future home. I was inspired to see how many people cared and how much they cared. And their vision was pretty inspirational too!

And then, in 2002 this property became available. The moment of truth was upon us. A couple of days ago, I dug out the original plan – proposed to the Board in April 2002. We were going to try to raise an amount deemed crazy: \$1,500,000. Also in that initial recommendation to the Board: our approach to echo this community's values; to show respect to each member by visiting them all and by celebrating each gift regardless of size.

Over the next 4 years our fundraising process morphed into the most successful outreach and community building exercise we could have imagined. We doubled our financial goal because our vision became more daring; and more appropriate. More than raising money, we were engaging our community in pursuit of a collective dream.

And I was contributing to the future of this community - that I was becoming ever more attached to – with my *secular* expertise and *despite* my lack of Jewish knowledge. So the use of my strategic thinking, project planning, communication and team building skills became an integral element of my Jewish journey.

The day when we marched from Hove together was truly magical for me. The knowledge that I had something to do with this profound sense of collective joy and fulfillment was truly a moving moment for me on every level.

And all this because I agreed with my wife that it was time to get “a little bit involved”

Spirituality – My Journey continues

I don't really know if life is a spiritual journey. In fact, I am not sure the metaphor of a journey works for me. I feel more like a painter with a big canvass to fill in. And today's speech notwithstanding, I feel like my spiritual canvass still has a lot of white space on it. Not surprisingly, writing this speech has forced me to think about spirituality more deeply than I've ever thought about it before; and I've concluded that it's about connecting to my true self ; about being who I am without being embarrassed about it. AND about a feeling of deep connection to our world, and to the people in it.

In honour of the new year, and the fact that I now have, for the first time, a personal definition of spirituality, I have come up with 4 spiritual resolutions. Here they are

- I will continue to deepen my connection to this world of ours through the hiking, canoeing, organic gardening, cooking and environmentalism that all mean so much to me. And I will actively share these pleasures with others.
- I will never stop exploring who I am, where I come from and what it means for *me* to be a Jew.
- I accept that I have been blessed with certain skills - and I will actively seek out challenges that enable me to utilize my talents in work that makes a difference in the lives of others. And I will continue to take risks as I know of no other way to achieve great results and no other dish as sweet as success served on top of uncertainty and doubt.

- I will continue to immerse myself in the experience of community and, in particular, of my Darchei Noam community; working together, learning together, laughing and crying together and, yes, sometimes even praying together.

There is a really old Jewish joke about Schwartz and Goldberg who have been attending shul together for 25 years. Goldberg davens from the minute he enters the shul; Schwartz sits quietly next to him until services are over. One day, the Rabbi asks why they come to shul. Schwartz answers for both: “Goldberg, he comes to talk to God; but me, I come to talk to Goldberg”.

I’ve often feel a lot like Schwartz and been a little embarrassed about it. But now that I’ve thought about my spiritual journey – er canvas – I feel better.

Thank you again for this most meaningful honour. I can honestly say that preparing for this day was truly a spiritual experience.

Shabbat Shalom