

Thank you to Lisa, Rabbi Grimberg and the DN Community, for inviting me to be this year's Kallah Bereshit. I'm especially honoured to deliver this address in our new home, and with my real chattan of thirty years. Bet some of you didn't realize Rabbi Tex had a wife...

When Lisa first reached out to me, my response to this honour was mixed. While both moved and grateful for the opportunity to share my spiritual story, I realized the moment of reckoning had arrived; I would need to confront the notion of spirituality and what it means to me personally, and then share it with all of you! Since I have never felt connected to divine concepts or the image of an anthropomorphic creator, this was challenging. And yet I knew my life was not devoid of spirituality, so I decided to think about the concept differently.

I likened spirituality to gravity. I don't *really* understand what gravity is (and if you knew my technical acumen, that would not surprise you). But, I do know that the effects of gravity are ever present and keep us grounded. In the same way, while I may not be able to define spirituality, its effects are also ever present and keep us grounded. Spirituality inspires our wellbeing and our connection to friends, family and community. And, for a Reconstructionist Jew, who thinks of Godliness and spirituality as those beliefs and values that inspire us to make a positive difference in our world, this 'ever present essence' is inextricably linked with my Judaism and Jewish community – so that's where I'll begin...

There are many psychologists and educators in this congregation. If you are one of them, you may be familiar with the 'learning competency model'. As I think back to my elementary school years in Halifax, I believe I was an "unconsciously competent Jew" within the context of this model. In the "unconsciously competent" quadrant, you don't actually know that you know something. You

just do the thing that feels natural and easy. And that's how I 'did Jewish' in my youth.

I have a virtual photo album from that period of my life. There are snapshots so hard-wired in my memory that they may be the last things I lose when my memory ultimately vanishes. The early positive Jewish experiences may explain why I have always sought spiritual and Jewish belonging within community, versus privately. And the ugly and uncomfortable experiences early in my life may have caused me to seek shelter from an unwelcoming world in the sanctuary (pardon the pun) of a protective Jewish community.

A favourite snapshot from this period is my family's walk home from shul on Kol Nidre evening. While we typically drove to shul, I recall parking our car at Shaar Shalom on Kol Nidre evening, davening and then walking home. We would start at the corner of Oxford and Quinpool, wind our way down to Connaught Avenue and, continuing along Connaught, we would drop off family and friends along the way. I recall warm, starry fall evenings (but, knowing Halifax, they were probably cold and rainy). We wished our companions Good Yontif as they left our posse for their front doors, and knew we would reconnect at shul the next morning. And in bed that night, I planned *my* next day's strategy: *How long would I have to sit at my shul before making my way to other shul to hang out with my best friend? How long would I really be able to last with no food? Would Esther tempt me to eat, like she did the previous year? And on like this...*

At that point in my life, I doubt I had a single spiritual thought, and rarely pondered God (except when begging forgiveness upon giving into Esther). Yet, amongst family, friends and community, I felt uplifted and pure in the sense of just 'being', not over thinking, the holiday experience. During the Chagim, I felt good, I felt connected, and I could cope with not having blonde hair, not being

allowed on the grounds of the restricted Waegwoltic Club and not being Christian like everyone else in Halifax.

Unfortunately, there were also unpleasant and frightening moments like,

- The day adrenaline kicked in, and I sprinted and hid from the ‘Catholic boys’ who chased me and called me a Dirty Jew
- Each time I was embarrassed or scared so I lied at the bus stop after school – about being en route to piano lessons instead of Hebrew School
- My disbelief when a new friend finished teaching me the guitar chords for “Let it Be” and, out of the blue asked: “is it really true Jews don’t have horns?”

In those situations, I *really* wanted blonde hair, to be allowed on the grounds of the restricted Waegwoltic Club and to be Christian like everyone else in Halifax. While in truth I had more good experiences growing up Jewish than bad, I never forgot that feeling of discomfort and will never take the concept of belonging for granted.

Saturday morning Junior Congregation provided me with an initial structure for communal prayer and an opportunity to both lead and participate in services. Believe it or not, I actually liked Junior Congregation! Yet there was something even better on Saturday morning than the service, which prepared me for eventual membership at Darchei Noam. You guessed it - KIDDUSH! Half way through services I was salivating in anticipation of salami sandwiches in the Blue Room with my fellow ‘juniors’. We had the same lunch every week and I never tired of it. We may not have solved committee or ritual issues over salami and rye but we learned how to make friends and schmooze. I may have missed the educational richness of a Jewish Day School curriculum, but I learned something about what was important to me as a Jew.

As I became a teen, synagogue life lost its appeal and was replaced by a more compelling social, cultural and ideological Jewish option: my relationship with Camp Kadimah and Young Judaea.

Kadimah enabled Jewish kids from across the Atlantic Provinces to spend six intense weeks together, away from our parents. In addition to providing regular camp activities, Kadimah was filled with zany Israel-day programs, Israeli music and dance, one kuntz (trick) after another in the middle of the night, and our weeklong camp-wide Maccabia games. At Kadimah, we built and sustained friendships that would become life-long. And, most summers there was that special romance which even our parents approved of, given the dearth of 'nice Jewish boys' in the Maritimes!

Shabbat at camp was special. Each Friday, after a couple of hours of attacking the mess we had generated all week in our cabins, we arrived for services and dinner scrubbed and donned in blue and white. Kabbalat Shabbat services were outdoors followed by our best meal of the week, singing, dancing and late sleep-in the next morning. The openness and enjoyment of our weekly observance was only replicated for me when I spent my first Shabbat in Israel.

When we hugged and cried at the end of each summer, we vowed to extend our 'cult-like' experience by meeting at an upcoming kinus (conference) and participating in ongoing programming back home. As we matured, these entailed late night arguments over how to save the world or discussions on making aliyah some day, more Israeli singing and dance and leadership training so we could eventually run weekly programming at home and fill future staff roles at camp.

I had begun to make choices about how to spend my time and, in that process, sacrificed some of the relationship building my school friends were involved in, throughout the year and especially during

those carefree summer days and nights in the city. Yet I never doubted that that my focus on YJ and camp was right for me.

In 1973, at the end of high school, I deferred university for a year and signed up with a group of Canadian Young Judaeans for a year of study, travel and leadership development in Israel through the Machon L'Madrichei Chutz L'aretz - a leadership institute for youth leaders from abroad. After months of anticipation, I arrived at Kennedy Airport in September, along with 75 other 18 year olds from a diverse range of North American Jewish youth movements and communities. On one hand, I was totally overwhelmed by the crush of strangers in the airport lounge. On the other, I was completely electrified by the unabashed singing of spirited Hebrew songs and dancing of lively horas right in the middle of the terminal. I was definitely "not in Kansas", and I experienced a major "high" before even setting foot on the plane.

We arrived at Kiryat Moriah in Jerusalem and were joined by additional teens from Britain, Holland and Australia. In the first five months of our program, we were to focus on learning Hebrew and getting to know the country. We would study Jewish history, cultural tradition and leadership skills to bring back to our youth movements. For the second half of the year we would split up and relocate to our various movement kibbutzim – to study more Hebrew, volunteer and view Israeli life through a different lens.

Even if things had unfolded as expected, this would have been a life-changing experience that sparked new, wonderful friendships, many of which would last a lifetime. But they did not unfold as planned and the impact was even more dramatic...

Within a month of our arrival, while winding our way to the Western Wall for Yom Kippur services on October 6, 1973, we were shocked by the wail of sirens and, moments later, found ourselves in the bomb shelter under our school. Our teachers

were called up to the army, a troop of Miluim soldiers were stationed at Kiryat Moriah, and classes were suspended for the next month. Study was replaced by volunteer work, restlessness and worry. Our eyes were opened to the reality of living in Israel. Still, we *were* 18 and we knew how to have fun. The proof is in the pudding: of the 90 students on Machon of 1973, 10 of them ended up marrying a fellow Machonik (Alan and I are one of those couples). And as far as I know, all 5 couples are still together!

Five months of living in Jerusalem in 1973 was incredibly special. Jerusalem is a city with beauty and a spirit that is ancient and timeless. It's divinely inspired and a bustling market town. It's a place where one hears the language of Jews from all over the world and where, in '73, we could still mingle freely in the old city, sharing tea with Arab shop owners, even as we bargained. Our trips across the country exposed the richness of the land itself. And our experience picking melons, tending chickens and caring for children on K'far Glikson gave us first hand insight into the 'soon to vanish' fabric of kibbutz life.

For ten months, the Machon community was my life. We were a stubborn, passionate group of teens, ideologically polarized and 'knowing it all' yet learning to be more open to the diverse perspectives of our peer group. We learned, we changed and ultimately we moved on.

Moving on, for most of us, meant starting university. Alan and I ended up living in Toronto by our second year of school. Sadly, from a Jewish perspective I felt alienated from the other Jewish students I met at U of T. Judgmentally, I admit, I felt like they had known each other forever and that they were completely satisfied with each other's company. They had attended Toronto day schools together, lived at home with their parents, and seemed insular and unwelcoming. I felt that their approach to Judaism was too traditional in perspective and practice, while simultaneously I

found myself drifting further away from tradition. Fortunately, there were some exceptions: we reconnected with my Young Judaea friend Debbie Gilbert, and Alan and I were welcomed for the holidays at the home of a new friend we met while teaching at Temple Emanuel – Mark Adler. I guess neither of them fit the mainstream Toronto Jewish mold, since look where they both are today!

After graduation, and several years of working and saving, Alan convinced me to join him in putting our “adult lives on hold”. We left Toronto to travel for twenty months through Europe, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Through this experience, I awoke to the fact that there was actually a big, foreign and amazing world out there that I knew very little about. Our 20-month odyssey was a kind of spiritual journey. Each day we awoke to a new natural, historical, cultural, aesthetic or artistic marvel. We were 26 years old and our daily life was consumed by ‘the amazing’: hiking through breathtaking gorges in Crete; exploring the most extensive and stimulating museums and galleries in the world; camping out under lemon trees in Sicily; backpacking through poppy fields in the Thai hills; pondering the Temple of Luxor in Egypt and dancing with costumed elephants by torchlight in Sri Lanka. We intersected with people whose lives were often so simple and who had so few material possessions, yet were incredibly happy and generous. And each time we crossed a snow-capped mountain or a desert, or touched down in some other beautiful part of the world, it became clear to me that, even though I didn’t understand it, there was something bigger than any of us creating all this richness.

As much as I loved our existence – the freedom and personal growth – I also longed for family and our community back in Canada over those many months of being far away. I craved relationships with people that knew my stories and who would

drop by unannounced or spend hours together over Sunday brunches. I was also starting to be interested in finding a synagogue where we would feel comfortable over the next years.

Once we became parents, we joined a haymische congregation that we thought might fit our needs, based on location, size and atmosphere. Yet, their services were uninspiring and inaccessible, particularly to my 'Classical Reform' husband, and there was virtually no existing programming,

At the urging of our friends Howell and Liane, we attended a Darchei Noam High Holy Day service at a hotel. This failed to move me because the visceral connection I was seeking was hard to replicate in a 'conference-style' unfamiliar space with different melodies and minhagim. Still, Liane and Howell kept "hucking" us...inviting us to an information evening, marketing the Rabbi and sharing with us their stories of learning and their budding appreciation for ritual that was nurtured by other members of the shul. Ultimately, we gave in and, when Dan was four and Jordana was one - we joined Darchei Noam.

I knew we had arrived home when we walked into the simple sanctuary on Hove Street for the first time and Jan Silverman warmly welcomed us at the door. It was like she'd been expecting us.

As we dipped our toes in the water, attending a few services and programs, I began to question what 'doing Jewish' should now feel like, to an adult and a new parent. Suddenly I felt 'consciously incompetent' based on that same learning model I referenced earlier. While I saw opportunities to participate in ritual, leadership and programming, I also recognized how much I would need to learn in order to get involved. Fortunately, there were people in the community who would help me, and it became

apparent that by diving in I would very quickly feel like I belonged somewhere again. This was not the insular and unwelcoming community that had alienated me in university, but rather a community that unabashedly wanted, no, *needed* me.

So, shortly after joining the shul, I also joined our congregation's first Adult Bat Mitzvah class. With my 9-person cohort, I studied text and learned to chant; I donned my first tallit (Debbie Gilbert's first hand painted creation and a surprise gift from her and Alan); I was called to the torah; and I stood proudly as an adult Jewish woman, equal in all ways to Jewish men.

The same year as my Bat Mitzvah, Alan's sister Betsy succumbed to cancer. Every member of my Adult Bat Mitzvah class, as well as many shul members we had just met and even congregants we had never met, arrived at shiva. We were new members, had no experience with grieving and no expectations of others. Yet this community simply arrived to comfort and support us. Many people choose a congregation when they need a Hebrew School or a place for their children to have a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. We had just joined 'because', and it became even clearer that we'd made a good choice.

As Daniel and Jordana grew older, we participated in monthly Kabbalat Shabbat services with a close-knit group of members who had similar aged children. These services were informal and warm and incorporated singing, discussion, research and debate. They allowed our kids to be involved in whatever ways made sense.

We were the group that first harmonized to "V-Shamru" and "Dodi-Li" accompanied by David's guitar and Paul's violin. When we said good-bye to Hove in our final service earlier this year, we again harmonized to these melodies. As I looked around, I saw many members of our 'Kabbalat Shabbat chavurah' wiping their eyes. Ostensibly, we were saying good-bye to our basement

sanctuary and moving on. For this group, we were also bidding farewell to those very intimate and spiritual Friday nights.

Those Friday nights were only one way that Darchei Noam has allowed me to 'do Jewish' in a way that is comfortable and personally right over the years, regardless of 'Halachic Correctness'. I have never felt judged by this community when I pray in the forest on Sukkot or Rosh Hashana versus in the sanctuary; when I share Taslich with friends on a different day than everyone else; when I participate in Israeli dance or Yoga on Shabbat instead of attending services; and when I define 'Shomer Shabbas' as a walk in the ravine with Alan, followed by an afternoon of reading or visiting parents and a nap – even though I write and drive and use the phone. At Darchei Noam, I have never needed to defend my personal brand of Judaism.

Ours is a wonderful community that I want to give to, and do so with a full heart. I know whatever I give will be appreciated and returned tenfold. I am so grateful to be a member of Darchei Noam and know this is the kind of community that will continue to thrive over the years and to be here when I need it more than it needs me.

Thank you for this opportunity to share my journey with you all today.

Shabbat Shalom.