

“What Can One Do?”

The Bird in the Forest- A Fable

Once there was a forest and in that forest there was a tree and in this tree lived a little bird. The little bird loved her home. She loved the leaves, the branches, the tree and the entire forest. It was her home.

One day the little bird smelt something strange. She flew up, high over the canopy and saw in the distance a fire, a great snake of flames and smoke coming towards her. She called down to her friends, “It’s a fire, we must do something,” but all her friends fled. “Run away with us,” they called, “otherwise you will die.”

But the little bird loved her home and would not leave it to be destroyed. She flew down to a stream by the tree in which she lived and dipped her wings into the water. She then returned to the sky and when she was over the fire, tipped her wings to release the droplets of water. The water hissed and fizzed away in the flames in an instant. She flew back to the stream and again wetted her wings before returning to the fire. She did this time and time again with the fire getting closer and closer to her tree.

Up in the heavens, the gods looked down and laughed at the futility of the bird’s quest to save her home. But one god, the Eagle God, did not laugh.

Filled with admiration, he swooped down from heaven and joined the little bird as she flew between stream and fire. “Listen, little bird,” said the Eagle God, “You must fly away. Your attempts to put out the fire won’t work and you will die.”

“I don't care if I die,” cried the bird. “I love my home and I will do everything I can to save it.” The Eagle God was so filled with compassion that large tears began to drip from his eyes. They hissed and fizzled in the fire but these were big tears and soon there was stream of them, then a river and at last the fire was stifled. The Eagle God returned to heaven and the little bird to her tree.

And by spring, new shoots of life were peeping up through the carpet of ash.

How many people does it take to make a difference? The answer is, 1.

The foundation of Judaism is built brick by brick, person to person. One Jew taking the time to mentor another Jew, by teaching a word of Torah, by sharing a treasured family recipe, by creating family memories hosting family holiday meals, by volunteering to donate food or clothing to Jewish Child and Family Services, by sitting with your young adult children and watching the latest Israeli film, by buying your grandchild a Jewish themed story book, by attending a lecture on the situation in Israel with your friend, by volunteering to sit on a board to ensure that all Jewish camps in our city are vibrant and sustainable and by supporting synagogue life in this city by attending, by donating and supporting the bricks that make up the buildings where many of us meet to engage in these “Dor L’ dor” or, from “one generation to another” kinds of activities...

I must admit, I am not really a “joiner”. I like the freedom to choose what I want, when I want. My name is Sherry Wolfe Elazar and for many years I was really a “wandering Jew”.

My first taste of authentic and meaningful Judaism happened at Bnai Brith Camp in the 1970's. My formal introduction to Jewish spirituality happened in Israel when I lived there during the 1980's. I lived on Kibbutz Gezer and we had a chavurah of people who gathered on Friday nights for Kabbalat Shabbat and to celebrate holidays. We took off our shoes at the door as we were entering a holy place. We sang, we meditated, we did yoga and we created a community within our Kibbutz community. What happened in that room spiritually, was often beyond the realm of reality.

When we left Israel and came to live in Winnipeg, I searched for a synagogue that would meet the needs of my soul. None of the synagogues were perfectly suited for us at that time. So, we began our wanderings, attending synagogue regularly, but never committing to a community. We attended the Roses' alternative and meaningful high holiday services for decades, we went to Chevra Mishnaot to dance and enjoy the freilech atmosphere of Simchat Torah, we attended Shaarey Zedek for the Shabbat family minyan lead by my brother, Randy and attended the Purim Megillah reading when my kids were young. We attended Etz Chaim on Shabbat mornings to hear the exquisite davening of my friend Tracy Kasner Graves, we went to Herzlia to learn and our daughter was part of Chabad's excellent pre-“Bat Mitzvah Club” program. I like to call myself a “post denominational Jew”, taking the best of all streams of Judaism and incorporating these experiences into my life.

These were all very positive Jewish experiences, but something was missing for us. We were of it, but not in it.

We did join the Beth Israel Synagogue before my son Charley's Bar Mitzvah because of our respect and admiration for Rabbi Alan Green who was the Rabbi there at the time. But, we really didn't connect with the synagogue as a community.

So, along came the time to plan my daughter Jana's Bat Mitzvah. We were going to deviate from the current trend of a Saturday morning or Saturday evening Bat Mitzvah and return to a more traditional path and do a Friday night Bat Mitzvah. Ironically, tradition had become alternative. I did, however, want her to chant Torah as part of her initiation into the Jewish community as a young adult and so decided to look for a venue "off site" of the Jewish community. A Torah Service is not usually part of a Friday night Kabbalat Shabbat. I found a beautiful spiritual space complete with pews at the Mennonite College. It was booked and plans began for Jana's Bat Mitzvah that would be held on the last long weekend in August of 2007. Jana began learning her Torah portion and Haftarah. We were conducting the service ourselves, so Torah portions and readings and other parts of the service were distributed to friends and family and everyone began to prepare.

In about May of that year, Jana who was 12 years old at the time came to me. "Mommy", she said, "I want to have my Bat Mitzvah in a synagogue. This is really important to me."

I looked at her and thought before I replied (for a change). Here was my young daughter ASKING me to host this rite of Jewish passage in a Jewish space. My daughter has always been more traditional in her Jewish thinking than I. What a role reversal...the bohemian Mom learning from her traditionally oriented daughter. Jana has always been wise beyond her years.

I told Jana that I would try to come up with a solution, although it was very close to the event and the date had to stay the same due to all the preparations that had already taken place for that Torah and Haftarah reading. This was so important to her that Jana was even prepared to start all over again learning a new Torah portion if necessary.

Meanwhile, that past winter, I had finally taken the time to come to a Friday Night Live service at Temple Shalom. I had heard about this service. Music is integral for me to experience spiritual moments in my life. This service had this and more. Alan Finkel was leading the service that night. In his Dvar Torah, he spoke about his journey from a traditional Jewish upbringing and how he had found his spiritual home here at Temple Shalom. His words moved me and the music uplifted me. I watched this prayer leader, Cantor Len Udow; bring an "*avera*" or atmosphere of holiness into the room with his beautiful music and pure kavana or intention. The most striking thing that I noticed, was that in spite of the band, and the immense talent on the Bima, this was not a performance, rather, an invitation to engage in prayer in a meaningful and accessible way. People had said that I would love this service as it reflected so much of how I felt and taught about prayer in my work as a Judaic Studies teacher at The Gray Academy of Jewish Education. Another thing that I experienced that night was a bit strange for me. Because of my long teaching experience in the Winnipeg Jewish community, I have taught a lot of students and been involved with many families through the years. It is rare for me to walk into a Jewish event and know no one.

This is what happened the first night that I came to Temple Shalom. I knew know one. And no one knew me. In many ways this was refreshing. A clean slate.

Subsequently, I returned many Friday nights where lay service leaders and Len gave me the Shabbat experience of *oo va Yom ha shvee'ee Shavat v' Yeenafash* which means “on the seventh day you shall rest and be renewed”. They renewed me, re-energized me, refocused me and re-juvenated me after a long week of work and responsibilities.

When Jana spoke to me about her Bat Mitzah, I thought about Temple Shalom immediately. It seemed that they would be open enough to accommodate this “alternative” Bat Mitzah that we were planning. I hoped that Len Udow might agree to help us with the Tfillah. And so I got Ruth Livingston's number and called her. I introduced myself and explained the situation. I emphasized to her that we were not just looking to rent a space for my daughter's Bat Mitzvah; rather, we were looking for a community where we could belong and contribute. She spoke to Judith Huebner who was President at the time and they graciously agreed to waive many rules about membership and finances to accommodate this last minute request.

We joined Temple Shalom and had a beautiful Bat Mitzvah. Everyone here worked so hard to make that one of the finest moments in the Wolfe-Elazar family.

Throughout the last 7 years, my husband, Patrick and I have tried to be contributing members to the Temple Shalom community by teaching youth programs, facilitating adult learning, leading services, participating in choirs and just pitching in when needs arose. But, we have received far more that we have given. We have found a welcoming home for our Jewish life. People have been kind and have had great impact on us. Len, through your support and friendship, you have given me a gift that changed my life. By gently encouraging me, you gave me the courage to use my voice as a spiritual instrument both in my professional and spiritual life here. Your inspiring music has taken me to places deep inside of myself. Rabbi Karen, I love to learn with you and you have opened my eyes to even greater depths of Torah. Ruth, you have been a constant presence and support for all of my ideas and classes. Linda, your no nonsense approach to life has often realigned my path. Janet, your friendship, respect for Judaism and evocative musical creations have enriched my life. And Rutie, my greatly missed long time teaching partner from Gray Academy. I have so many things to thank you for, but mostly for always affirming that I am making the right choice when I come to you for advice. One night, many years ago, I finally got her to agree to come to a Friday night service and schlepped her out on a cold winter night. She was hooked! She joined the Temple that year and after retiring from teaching, became the Administrator of the Temple where she is the engine that keeps this train moving forward.

These are some of the people who I found here. This is the Jewish life that that I found at Temple Shalom. This is the community that I found that supports people in their times of joy and in their times of need.

This is a community where there are opportunities to learn and to decide about how to best to express one's Jewish identity according to personal values and beliefs. This is the community that accepts and welcomes everyone...no matter how disenfranchised, no matter how financially able, no matter how long living on the periphery or even outside the Jewish community.

So even though we build and sustain our Jewish community by one to one personal contact and through programs and services, there is still the issue of the bricks.

This is the time when I am supposed to ask you to consider making a donation to Temple Shalom to help sustain this community that I have been speaking about. I will let you in on a secret. I am terrible at fundraising. I do not like asking people for money. When I had to sell chocolates, or show and save books or boxes of oranges and grapefruits to raise money for various activities for my children, I always preferred to buy all of my allocated boxes or books or oranges so that I did not have to hit up my parents, family and friends for more money for yet another fundraiser. When Miral asked me to deliver this speech, I said yes without thinking about how challenging it would be.

I have always thought about the difference between *tzedakah* which means “charity” and *truma* which means “donation”. In my opinion, tzedakah is what we are obligated to give to contribute to society for the poor, the needy, the ill, the weaker members of our society. The Torah tells us to give 10% of our earnings to Tzedaka.

Trumot which means “donations” are voluntary; giving to various causes that one feels connected to. The Torah gives us no guidance in this area- we are to give what we feel is appropriate.

So, I will ask you to consider giving to Temple Shalom as a Truma. I will also ask you to consider giving as a Truma, not only your money. Please think about the possibly of giving your expertise in some area, your talent, your knowledge and most importantly, your presence to the Temple community this coming year. Be the one to make the difference in someone’s life.

So what is this building? It is not Noah’s Ark in spite of the 3 floods that it has endured! This is a Beit Midrash- A House of Learning. This is a Beit T’fillah- a House of Prayer. This is a Beit Knesset- A House of Gathering. But most importantly, this is a Beit Mekdash- A Holy Place. So I will make my request to you by offering you a song. Debbie Friedman wrote a song “Holy Place” inspired by the Torah portion called “Truma”. Parashat Trumah describes the gifts that the Children of Israel voluntarily brought to build the Mishcan or Tabernacle, which was the first synagogue ever built where people could gather to be unified and connected as one people.

Holy Place by Debbie Friedman

These are the gifts that we bring
that we may build a holy place.
This is the spirit that we bring
that we may build a holy place.
We will bring all the goodness
that comes from our hearts
And the spirit of God will dwell within...

These are the colours of our dreams
we bring to make a holy place.

This is the weaving of our lives
we bring to make a holy place.
We will bring all the goodness
that comes from our hearts
And the spirit of love will dwell within...

These are the prayers that we bring
that we may make a holy place.
These are the visions that we seek
that we may build this holy place.
Let our promise forever be strong,
let our souls rise together in song,
that the spirit of God
and the spirit of love,
Shechinah,
will dwell within.

Wishing all of you a year of holy moments and connection.

Sherry Wolfe-Elazar