

April 2019 Message from President Howie Hirsch

My Jewish Journey Part I

In March, I was asked to speak at a Presbyterian confirmation retreat to an audience of young adults aged 12–15 about my journey of being Jewish in our society. I had to think long and hard about what I wanted to say, and this also gave me time to reflect on my religious journey. I will share my thoughts with you this month and next.

My adult Jewish journey began after my Bar Mitzvah. I had spent 5 days a week going to Hebrew school and services from the time I was 7 until I was 13. By the Bar Mitzvah, I had had enough. After that, I limited temple attendance to the High Holidays, although my family did celebrate all the major Jewish holidays at home. During my college years, I heard about something called an “eruv,” which allowed the Orthodox, at least in my mind, to circumvent the laws of Shabbat. I was so incensed by this that I turned away from Judaism.

As a young adult, I had the opportunity to learn to be a computer programmer as a trainee at AT&T. During my training, the final exam was to write a program and produce specific output. I had 20 days to do this. The day before the program was due was Yom Kippur. I had never worked on Yom Kippur before and decided that instead of asking for a one-day extension, I would just work through the day and get the project done. When I went into work, I accomplished absolutely nothing while the sun was up. When the sun set and the Holy Day was over, within an hour I had my work completed. At that point, I looked to the skies and said to myself, “OKAY, I get it.” This was the “aha moment” in my life regarding how I would live my life as a Jew.

Within a month of that day, I met Iris and fell in love with the most beautiful and kindest woman that I have ever met. Do I think any of this was a coincidence? I don't. As we fell in love and talked about our future, we needed to make one major decision in our lives: since Iris was Catholic, would we bring up our children as Jewish? As much as I loved Iris, if she had said something different, I think that would have been a deal breaker for me.

We were married in the temple I grew up in and began our lives. I started to become more active in my temple. Really, that meant I assisted with fundraising by working the weekly bingo games, and was soon asked to be one of the callers. My daughter Jessica was born in 1984 with a condition called Trisomy 18, which is mainly incompatible with life, and she passed away at 11 months old. It was devastating. The one phrase that my Rabbi used to comfort us was that this “taught us how to love.” I didn't understand what he meant, but the phrase stuck with me.

Four years later we were blessed to adopt Sam, and then were blessed again the next year with Allison and Caitlin, after we moved up to Warren County.

I'll finish telling you about my religious journey (thus far) next month.

Love, Howie

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