

May 2019 Message from President Howie Hirsch

My Jewish Journey, Part II

I continue my story in 1993 when Sam turned 4 years old. I knew that as Iris was still Catholic, most of our children's Jewish education would fall on me. I relished this role. My first task was to find a temple, as the temple in Bound Brook was 50 minutes away, and if they were still holding classes 5 days a week, I would not be able to take Sam, and later Allison and Caitlin, to Hebrew school.

I started looking in the area, and the first temple I found was the Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey, 18 minutes from my home. I visited the temple on a Friday night and was very impressed by the family atmosphere and the haimish feel of the temple. It reminded me very much of the temple I grew up in. I made plans to investigate further, including going to High Holidays services. I requested a ticket and was told that there were no tickets. I was very impressed by this. We sat in the rabbi's classroom where I could barely hear the service, but I still got the feel of the place. I went to a Friday night service in the spring and still felt this was the right place for me and my family, and I believe there was a gentleman rabbi. At that point, I had never considered that a woman could become a rabbi. I decided to become a member the next year.

I began by enrolling Sam in Hebrew school. The first services I attended were for Rosh Hashanah, 1994. In the week between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, I had a life-changing event. I fell out of a third-story window while doing repairs around my house, and I spent Yom Kippur in the hospital. I remember Art Sirkis coming to visit me. I did not know who he was, and he told me he was a member of the temple, and he brought me a copy of Chicken Soup for the Soul. As I had no ability to read for long periods of time, these short stories were perfect and truly inspirational.

Iris brought Sam to Sunday school for the first few months, as I was under doctor's orders not to drive. My new goal was that I wanted to be able to dance at my cousin Erik's Bar Mitzvah four months later, and with the help of my family, friends, and a great physical therapist, I was able to accomplish that. One of the driving forces of my life is that we need to celebrate as often as we can with our family and friends. Life is too short not to take advantage of these celebrations, and we should celebrate with gusto.

It was at this point that I met Rabbi Ellen Lewis, who had just signed on to be the rabbi at the temple. Rabbi Lewis would become a close friend as well as my spiritual leader during the time I was raising my children. I loved and still love Rabbi Lewis. She has taught me so much. One of the things I learned was what it means to live a Jewish life, which is that Torah study is good to do, but if you do not put what you learn into practice and go out and do good in the world, you really haven't learned the lessons of Torah.

One of the things I remember was that in the spring of 1995, we were getting ready to have a Purim carnival. I was still not in great shape from my fall and needed to come up with an idea that would be fun for the kids and easy for me. That was when I devised the Hit

Haman Booth, which enabled the children to throw wet sponges at me. I did not realize what a HIT it would become over the years. I loved watching the kids grow up in front of me, and trembled when the pre-Bar Mitzvah class would line up to see who could throw the sponge the hardest.

Somewhere around the third year of being a member, Richard Eisenberg, who was the treasurer, asked me if I wanted to be on the Finance Committee. I was apprehensive and asked what the commitment was. At the time I had three children, aged 8 (Sam) and 7 (the twins), and they were getting involved in all sorts of activities, and I did not have time to dedicate to the temple (or so I thought). Rich told me the committee met twice a year. I thought I could handle that. The next year, Rich resigned as treasurer and I was asked if I could do the job. That was where my involvement in the temple really began.

The first task I had to do as treasurer was to give the Yom Kippur appeal. I had never spoken before a large group of people and was really scared to have to deliver the appeal. But I went ahead and did it. Then I gave the appeal two more times, and each time I did, I became better at public speaking and less nervous.

Three years later, Iris was diagnosed with breast cancer and I had to give up my position as treasurer and my position on the board to take care of her and my family.

By the next June, she was free of cancer and I made a request to be back on the board. Sharon Herson wanted me to be the vice president with the intention of being a future president. When she called me to ask, she said that the person who was “in line” to be president had had a falling out with the rabbi and would I do it instead. The thought of having that kind of responsibility was frightening, but after talking with my father, who to this day still gives me unsurpassed advice, I decided to give it my best.

Part 3 will continue in [next month's message](#).

Love, Howie

Howie