

## How did I get here? Bill Schroh Rosh HaShana AM I 2014/5774

Before I tell you the story of how I became a member of Temple Beth Shalom, I want to tell you another story. This happened when Lynne and I had first bought our house and were moved in. We had lived there for some time and felt settled in. We came back from Westchester one night after visiting our parents, and found something burned into our lawn. It looked like a combination of the New York Yankees symbol and a Peace sign. Lynne felt it was far from peaceful. I blew it off as kids doing something stupid. Lynne thought that it might be anti-Semitic. She remembered something similar happening along the road behind her house as a child. I called my Dad, who is a retired police officer and he said we should report it. The police officer told us not to worry, he took pictures of it and that was that.

When it came time for our first Hanukkah in our home, I wanted to put an electric Menorah in the window, Lynne was worried it would bring attention to our house as being Jewish. I said that we were going to put it up and I didn't care if the neighborhood knew we were a Jewish household that was who we are. That was the first time that I thought of my home as a Jewish household and I was not going to hide it from anyone. To this day our electric Menorah goes into the window every year. If I had my way I would have a large blow-up Menorah in the front yard, but my wife, who is the voice of reason, says no, it would be tacky, and she is right.

But back to the question of how did I get here? I have wondered that to myself over the years. Growing up in Crotonville, NY almost everyone I knew was Catholic. I even had two aunts that were Lutheran, but were married in the Catholic Church. I thought that's what people did if you married into a Catholic family. I went to church every Sunday and celebrated all of the major Holidays like Easter and Christmas. I had some friends in school that were not Catholic, but I didn't know what religion they were. We never talked about it. I went through all of the sacraments of being a good Catholic: Baptism, Holy Communion, Confirmation and I just assumed that I would get married to in the church as well. I liked going to church because my family had been members of the congregation for generations and I felt proud that I was part of that too. I think I liked that part because I am an historian. I always loved history! But all that time I never really felt at home I was just going through the motions!

I think that the first time I thought that I might not marry a Catholic occurred in my Junior year of High School. On a fall day after coming back from Cross Country practice, I saw my friend's younger sister Amy sitting under the soccer goal eating Chinese food with someone I did not know. I ran over to say "hi" and I thought that her friend was cute. Her friend was Lynne. Lynne and I began a courtship/friendship that would go on and off for about 10 years. We dated a bit in high school and before her freshman year of college but never got serious. Most of the problems over these years were my fault, I was young and stupid. I think if you asked Lynne, she would say that I was a Jerk! Over those 10 years we both dated other people, yet always seemed to remain friends. It was not until we both finished college before we really started dating seriously and got married.

At one point we realized that things were starting to get serious, we both had strong feelings for each other and were starting to think about where this relationship might go. At that time I was working the front desk in the evenings at a nearby conference center. Lynne used to come and visit once the evening rush was over. One night she was about to leave and an important conversation just came out of nowhere. I don't know who started but we both acknowledged our feelings for each other and the possible difficulty that our differing religions posed. We pointed out the obvious, I said that I was raised Catholic and Lynne said that she was raised as a Jew. She went on to say that the only way she knew how to raise children was the way that she was raised, Jewish. I felt that it was more important for children to have one religion and one set of rules to follow. I did not have a problem with that.

Once we decided to get married the discussion began about what type of service we should have at the wedding. I thought (still being a practicing Catholic) that we should have a Priest and a Rabbi, that way both our families would be happy. Lynne felt that we should have just a Rabbi, but not a Priest, so we compromised and were married by a Justice of the Peace. However, the one thing that we already had decided about religion was that our future children were going to be raised Jewish. I was slowly losing my attachment to Catholicism and Lynne was strongly attached to her Jewish identity. Having grown up with a grandfather who had lost most of his family to concentration camps during World War Two, Lynne felt it was important to honor his sacrifices by continuing the Jewish faith with her own family. I wanted our kids to have a strong moral background and I thought the Jewish faith would give them what they needed to be good people.

My first experience with services was at the temple that Lynne's family attended in Croton, NY shortly after our marriage. I did not know what to expect or what was going on. The only other time that I ever entered a temple was back in eighth grade when I attended a Bat Mitzvah of a friend and I really did not understand the service at all.

The issue of going to services or joining a temple did not come up again until we had moved to Warwick, when Lynne was pregnant with Emma. Lynne then explained to me that after the baby was born we would be having a bris or naming ceremony. One more new tradition that I had to learn about. Lucky for me, I have a great teacher, who is willing to let me ask lots of questions. Since Emma was a girl, we now only needed to worry about a naming ceremony. OK, now she tells me we need to find a Rabbi to perform the naming ceremony. What I thought where do we find a Rabbi. My first experience with a Rabbi, was Rabbi Loeb of the temple in Monroe who performed Emma's naming ceremony. Now that Emma was named Lynne suggested that we needed to join a temple. I wondered how do you decide which temple to join? In the Catholic Church you just walk in the front door and sit down. Is there a membership committee? Do you need to be voted in? We visited both the temple in Monroe and here and decided that we liked TBS better. We felt it had a more welcoming feeling. To me it felt like the American Legion Hall that I grew up in in Crotonville. Old, small, and comfortable all things I like. For Lynne, it felt like the informal, homey temple that she grew up in.

After being here a few years Theo came along and next we had to have a bris. Another new tradition that I had to learn about. Theo's bris was during a snow storm and the Rabbi was barely able to make it to our house. The kid lived through it. Now religious school begins. I hoped my kids wouldn't ask me any questions because I didn't know any of the answers. I watch my kids grow and attended classes with them, Lynne was teaching Sunday school for a few years so I was the school parent, as they learned about their religion, so did I. From Temple Tots with Ms. Stacy to Hebrew classes with Sharon Halper and to Bar/Bat Mitzvah classes with Rabbi Shinder, I have watched my children learn about their religion and I could never be prouder. Both of my kids can read Hebrew and I, I know that I have told them many times, but I am so impressed, I can barely read English. Now that they are adults in the Jewish world, I kind of miss attending Sunday classes with them. Today I consider the Temple part of my world. There are many times at work when we are having a discussion about world politics or religion, which happens a lot at the museum. People will turn to me and say ask Schroh, he's Jewish. I never would have guessed growing up that my life would lead me in this direction, but I am very glad that it did. I have found a second home here at temple Beth Shalom and I consider my many friends here part of my extended family. I am proud of the religious choices that Lynne and I made including joining this temple. I am proud to be considered a Jew. I don't know if I am ready to convert yet, but never say never.