

ROSH HASHANA FAMILY SERVICE BY FELICIA AND AVA GELL – 2020/ 5780

Felicia: Being asked to speak at this family service is such an honor for me and my family. Growing up a reform Jew in Brooklyn was a great experience in that it was also a small temple (compared to some others at the time) and because of that, was extremely family and community oriented. It was an extension of family outside my own immediate family, with people who I still consider among my closest to this day. Sharing huge milestones with each other, as a community, naturally became an important part of maintaining our relationships as a congregation. I will always remember how I felt when my Rabbi would hold up his arms as if he were hugging our entire congregation, the genuine way he would look you in the eye when he spoke. The Principal of the Hebrew School was someone whose quips and quotes about life kept us laughing and thinking beyond our time together. His wife was my favorite English teacher in Junior High School. Everything was intertwined, we knew we were wrapped up in a community that was paying attention and truly cared. It was a hard act to follow.

But from what I have witnessed here, I can see nothing is too difficult for Temple Beth Shalom. Act II came along when Paul and I started our own family, I was looking for that same sense of belonging, especially one without judgement. Where we could both be accepted and welcomed for our varying beliefs. I loved the idea of a female Rabbi, as a role model for my daughters where it did not need to be overtly taught that women can do whatever they set their minds to... I wanted it to be inherently understood, that this is how things are “just because” it’s the right way to do things. So, off we went to meet Rabbi and see the temple. I have always trusted my daughters’ reactions to people, and the way Rabbi spoke with Ava and looked her in the eye, and was interested in what she had to say, I was hooked. Ava looked over at me afterwards and I could see by the enormous smile on her face that she was hooked as well.

It was a new beginning for us, in a lot of ways in and outside of the temple, and with all of our other new experiences as a family, felt so supported in so many ways. Clearly our Rabbi and temple lives by the tenet “From little seeds grow mighty trees,” as each one of us is celebrated and respected for who we are and not who we are expected to be, bringing out the best in all of us.

Ava: My favorite memories with this temple’s community were not so long ago. I stood before you all at my bat mitzvah and talked about how grateful I was for the family I had here. I love that I am supported in all my endeavors by the people around me and that I am valued as an individual. My bat mitzvah was a monumental day in my life, and I look back on it with pride and love for TBS.

Since then I’ve attended confirmation class! It’s even more about the community aspect of Judaism. We cook, joke and laugh, play games, and learn so much about Jewish history, culture, and ideology. And even though we had to go online, we still put our best foot forward. In these times and always, I have felt the effort, energy, and love from this little community with a big heart.

Felicia: Since our first day as a part of Temple Beth Shalom until now, several years later, our shared experiences both triumphs and challenges have only served to deepen our resolve as a community and intertwine all of our lives; the more I learn about our temple’s history as well as what our members are capable of, inspire me. Just an example, look at us even since March, we were led to Zoom services that are thoughtful, creative, inclusive of our members and our loved ones even outside the temple. “Just come” continues to be the rallying, welcoming call, and I am in awe of what our temple has accomplished.

While this cycle of the year is an ending of sorts, what I love about this time of year is how new it all actually feels, and the hope of better times to come. As it is said, “I trust the next chapter because I know the author.” Whomever that author is for you, I hope that it will be a healthy and sweet new year filled with love, light and joy.

Shana Tovah