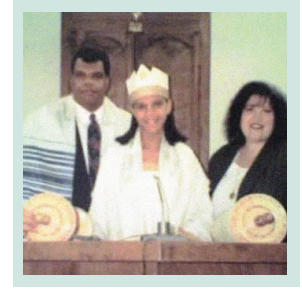




TRIUMPH AND TRAGEDY



Why I'm so Committed to Strengthening the Jewish Community

BY APRIL BASKIN

Judaism is not simply a religion; it is an extended family.

In North America, many are born into it, about half marry in, and many were adopted along the way. While statisticians claim that intermarriage is the cause of dwindling Jewish participation, the stories of my parents and thousands of interfaith couples, Jews of color, LGBTQ Jews and Jews with disabilities tell a more multi-dimensional story: For many of us, our Jewish commitments have not waned, rather we have had our efforts to join Jewish community thwarted by intentional and unintentional barriers.

I deeply believe that everyone should have at least one community in which they feel fully supported and unconditionally accepted, one they can count on to be there for them over the course of their lives. I consider it part of my life's work to ensure that this be the case, or at least a realistic option, for many more Jews and their loved ones. This mission is a personal one, inspired by the community that took my family in and supported us through triumph and tragedy.

When I was 9, my family moved to an area in northern California that had a very small Jewish community. My parents—a young interracial and initially-interfaith couple—decided that they wanted to join a congregation and be more intentional about raising their two young children as Jews. They were turned away by not only one, but two congregations.

Fortunately for me, my parents decided they still wanted and needed the support that a congregation could provide—and that Judaism was theirs to claim. So, even after two alienating experiences, they tried again. On their third attempt, my parents were welcomed into a wonderfully accepting Reform Jewish community, Sunrise Jewish Congregation. My parents were young recent college graduates, however, and could not afford to pay full dues. The congregation offered dues relief and requested payment of one dollar. My parents agreed, handed over the one-dollar bill, and the rest is history.

Sunrise Jewish Congregation became my second home and the cornerstone of a wonderful childhood. We attended Shabbat services and religious school regularly. My father took an Introduction to Judaism class and began studying with the rabbi. My mother joined the Board of Directors and served as the Director of Education for a couple of years.

Shortly after my Bat Mitzvah my father was diagnosed with hepatitis C. Despite the challenges of such a serious illness, including years of misdiagnosis, my parents worked very hard to ensure that I had a typical childhood, and the temple played a vital part in that. I was very engaged in youth group. In my senior year of high school, I served as youth group president and the social action vice president for North American Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY) Central West. But that wasn't all that happened in my senior year. Late in the fall semester, a careless 22-year-old in a fast Honda changed my understanding of the capacity and power of community—and most certainly changed my mother's life forever. He came speeding off the New Jersey Turnpike, going 80 miles an hour in a 20-mile-per-hour zone. When he rounded a sharp bend on the off ramp, he saw my mother's rental car stopped at the traffic light and slammed on the brakes, but nonetheless crashed, full-speed, into my mother's car.

The airbag didn't deploy. Her seat broke. And so did her cervical spine.

When I learned of the horrible accident, my world began spinning and I couldn't breathe. Was she going to die? How could we survive without my mother? At this point, my father seemed to be on his death bed. His aggressive chemotherapy treatment was unsuccessful in fighting the battle against the hepatitis C. He was bedridden and barely conscious or able to speak. He no longer had the personality of the father who raised me. As far as I could tell, that righteous, sweet, loving, vibrant man was already gone. It was a devastating situation and my younger brother, Andrew, and I



From left to right: April Baskin speaks at the Boston Black Lives Matter Hannukah Action in 2014. April Baskin talks with actor Michael Douglas, URJ President Rabbi Rick Jacobs, and restaurateur Danny Meyer at the 2015 URJ Biennial.

certainly were not equipped to manage it alone. My mother was the mighty glue that held our fragile family together. Without her, we were lost.

Even today tears fill my eyes when I recall how members of our congregation, our community, were there that first night, bringing meals and groceries. By the next morning, a cadre of our dear congregational family friends and temple lay leaders had established not only a food delivery schedule, but also a carpool schedule to get me to the magnet high school I attended, located one hour from our home.

Today, I'm incredibly grateful to still have both of my parents, who have invisible, but very real disabilities. I try always to remember to treasure each of our interactions because Andrew and I came deathly close to losing them both. I refuse to fully visualize what that story line would be like, though, when I briefly do, I am comforted knowing that our Jewish community would have been there for us. That, to me, is remarkable.

Thirty years ago, our congregation embodied audacious hospitality before the concept was conceived. Members embraced diverse families from nearly all Jewish denominations, racial and ethnic backgrounds, accommodated for disabilities and even had an openly gay cantorial soloist, Glenn Cooper (z"l), in whose honor we made a panel for the AIDS Memorial Quilt. We had a thriving religious school despite limited funds and an enriching intergenerational community in which elders and youth were well-acquainted. For me, the "audacious" element of audacious hospitality is the insistence that we do have the capacity to be courageous enough to take risks for the sake of being far more inclusive and intentional about our diversity, while also not forsaking or watering down the richness and depth that Judaism offers.

My mother recently shared, "Our rabbi was part-time when we first joined, but we had a ton of families and a thriving religious school. A number of families were on dues relief, but people stepped up. We made it work. I'm glad that we were turned away" by the cantor of one of the other congregations. "Because ultimately, he was right. I don't think we would have thrived at his congregation at all." His turning us down "was another way of saying, 'We're not ready for you, but someone else likely is.'"

My childhood was not without its heartache and challenges, but my Jewish community invested in my family and we wholeheartedly reciprocated. As a result of my family's refusal to accept rejection from religious authorities and commitment to fostering an enriching Jewish home, I have inherited a tradition and extended family that I know will be there for me throughout the rest of my life. I am committing my life to helping more people have access to, and be embraced by, such a loving community. I believe Jews (along with many other peoples) have a critical and unique role to play in fostering a world of wholeness, justice, and compassion.

The Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) leads the largest and most diverse Jewish movement in North America. We strengthen communities that connect people to Jewish life. As part of the URJ's 2020 vision, Audacious Hospitality is the focused effort to embrace our diversity and reach out to those currently not engaged in Jewish life. The URJ believes that everyone can feel at home in Jewish community—and that Judaism must meet people where they are today to thrive tomorrow. As a movement, we stand for a Judaism that is inclusive and open and believe that there is more than one authentic way to be Jewish. Audacious Hospitality is a transformative spiritual practice rooted in the belief that we will be a stronger, more vibrant Jewish community when we fully welcome and incorporate the diversity that is the reality of modern Jewish life. For more information, visit ReformJudaism.org.

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