

My Personal Journey With Judaism
by Ray McGarry
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My personal journey with Judaism started in 1988, as a third year in law school, when I decided to ask Sheryl Ziegler to become my wife. As a life-long and active Catholic, this was not a decision I took lightly. After having had many discussions with Sheryl about the many issues involved in an interfaith marriage, we had decided that we would have a civil wedding service, and that if we were lucky enough to have children, we would expose our children to both religions, raising them in neither, and try to stress the importance of spirituality to them. Seemed like a good plan. Well, in November 1989 we were married by a Judge, and we seemed to be moving forward with our plan..... Until the High Holy Day services in the Fall of 1991.

By that time, our oldest daughter, Elizabeth, was 2 months old, and we were attending services at Sheryl's Conservative synagogue. As we sat through the service it occurred to me, that our plan was no good. I realized that while it would be easy to "expose" our kids to Catholicism. Judaism, on the other hand, was a completely different story.

Nearly the entire service was in Hebrew and I could not understand a word of it. I thought to myself at that time, how unfair it would be to simply "expose" a child to Judaism. How could you do that? Without being fully immersed in the religion AND the culture, how could any child... any person... really understand Judaism. And by that time, I had learned that being Jewish is much more than a religion. There really is a need to understand the history, the culture, and a sense of "being Jewish", in order fully comprehend and create a Jewish identity. Immediately after the services, I told Sheryl that we had to raise our kids Jewish. And from that point on, we became a Jewish family, with a Jewish household.

Over the next several years we had two more children, Rebecca and Kate. We joined a reform synagogue. Sheryl started teaching Hebrew school. The kids went to preschool and religious school at the synagogue. We went to a family service every Sunday

morning when we dropped the kids off at Hebrew School. And slowly, but surely, I started to feel accepted into the Jewish community.

Then in May 2002, my world turned upside down. Sheryl died suddenly... in her sleep... on Mother's Day weekend. The girls were 10, 7 and 2. Here I was, a widowed Catholic man, with three Jewish girls. I had no concept of what to do or how I was going to do it. But several wonderful women in the neighborhood, and some incredible friends, helped me... and the kids ...move forward.

I remember several people asking me at the time... what are you going to do with the girls? Are you going to continue to raise them Jewish? Frankly, it wasn't even a question that I considered. In my mind, THEY WERE JEWISH. It wasn't an issue of how to raise them. They already had a very strong Jewish identity.

So fast forward a year or so later, and its time to start making plans for Elizabeth's Bat Mitzvah. At that time, I had never even been to a Bat or Bar Mitzvah, let alone have to plan one. I used to joke that it was like a crazy Seinfeld episode... Catholic man raising three Jewish girls and planning a Bat Mitzvah. Funny stuff. But like everything else in life, I find that you can do anything with a great support structure around you. And I had that. But I also found that no matter how strong that support structure was, I was missing something in my life.... A life partner.

So a couple of years after Sheryl died, and about a year before Elizabeth's Bat Mitzvah, I made the decision to start dating again. Now dating is hard enough... but try dating with three young girls, and trying to explain to women what they'd be walking into. It's funny, but was also a real serious concern of mine. I really HAD to marry someone Jewish. Could you imagine two Christian parents raising three Jewish girls? Impossible. So I did what every good Jewish boy does... I joined JDate! My profile started out with, "I'm not Jewish, but my children are". Catchy, right? Well lucky for me, a few months after joining, I met the most amazing woman.

Hannah was someone I had actually met when I was in law school. Her best friend dated my roommate, and we were introduced at a couple of functions. But I hadn't seen her in many years. Strangely enough, Hannah had gone to elementary and middle school with Sheryl, and had heard about her death. She reached out to me on JDate and offered to give me some dating advice. After a little while, I decided to take Hannah up on her offer. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Hannah, like Sheryl, was raised conservative. But Hannah's parents keep Kosher in the house, so that was new for me, and brought many new learning opportunities. And lucky for me, Hannah was willing to jump right in and become a part of our family. And she has! There are no words to describe how lucky I am, and how lucky I know the girls are that Hannah came into our lives. And I cannot forget Hannah's parents too... since the beginning, they've been amazing grandparents to the girls.

About a year and a half after we first started dating, Hannah and I were married. And unlike my first wedding, it was important to me that this service be a Jewish service. My kids were Jewish. I felt like I belonged in the Jewish community. But believe it or not, it was not easy to find a Rabbi to marry us. I asked a Rabbi from my synagogue with whom I had a close relationship. But she declined. She would not perform an interfaith ceremony. I was hurt. I didn't understand. I was more active in the synagogue than many members. I was raising my children Jewish, and had a Jewish home. But nonetheless, she said no. Lucky for me, another Rabbi at the synagogue agreed to marry us. And it really was beautiful. But the entire experience did make me question just how welcome I really was in the Jewish community.

Well shortly after the wedding, life threw us another curve ball. We learned that our synagogue was closing. We needed to find a new home. Becca's Bat Mitzvah was about a year away. Hannah and I started researching synagogues in the area. We wanted a place where we felt at home. We wanted a place where I was accepted as a member of the Jewish family, and where I could participate in Rebecca's upcoming Bat Mitzvah.

We visited several synagogues. But the moment we set foot in KI, we knew we were home.

I can still recall the moment today. It was a Friday night service. And one of the first things I saw, and one of the first things I still see to this day when I come into KI, was Cantor Amy's giant smile. Amy was so warm, so welcoming. She immediately made us feel at home. And Rabbi Sussman's sermon was incredible. It didn't take long for me to figure out that Rabbi Sussman was perhaps the most intelligent man I had ever met, and that... for me...he brought a new and different, spiritual, yet educational, approach to his sermons. Starting with that first service for each and every service I have attended since, I have learned something from Rabbi Sussman.

So, not only did we join KI immediately after that first service, but we feel like we've become a part of KI. Amy and Ross have become personal friends and mean so very much to our entire family. We are blessed to have them as friends. Hannah has served on the Board. Rebecca and Kate were both Bat Mitzvahed here. And I was welcomed to fully participate in those celebrations. Elizabeth and Rebecca were both confirmed here, and Kate will be confirmed next spring. As a family, we have celebrated at KI. We have cried at KI. We have prayed at KI. We have sung at KI. And we have socialized at KI.

So my Jewish journey has brought me to today. I cannot express in words how meaningful it is for me to be asked to address the congregation on Yom Kippor, the most Holy of days. I feel honored. But it's much more than that. I feel welcome. Even though I have never formally converted, ...in the spiritual sense, today I feel as if I have been fully accepted into the Jewish community. I feel at home. And for that I thank you.