

Shalom. My name is Lore Kantrowitz. My husband Charlie Ashdown and I are beginning our fourth year as members of Kahal B'raira. I am honored to have this opportunity to share my thoughts with you, and struck by the knowledge that only in a congregation like KB could a member with so little formal Jewish education be asked to speak on such an important occasion.

And, as an aside, you might ask why do I have so little past connection with Jewish religious traditions and education? Bear with me as I tell you a bit about my background. Both of my parents were first-generation Americans, and their parents had emigrated from eastern Europe near the turn of the twentieth century. My mother and father had strong personal identities as Jewish Americans, but each was devoted to science, reason, and humanity as the guiding principles for the structure and fabric of their lives. While tolerant of others' choices, their knowledge of the often divisive -- and sometimes deeply destructive -- impact of actions taken in the name of religion throughout recorded history added to their mistrust of formal religion. And then there was the god issue. I vividly remember my father's description of his profound sense of humiliation as he recalled his Bar Mitzvah, in which he paid homage to the traditions of his ancestors, but parroted words that created a deep sense of disconnection within him. My mother had a fabulous talent for throwing in the perfect Yiddish word or phrase that created just the right emphasis or mood, but little formal Jewish education herself or interest in religious rituals.

Nevertheless, every winter we lit our Israeli menorah somewhere near the time of Hannukah, every spring we participated in a Passover Seder with my father's extended family and made it through at least the third or fourth page of the Haggadah; and every fall we talked about our personal shortcomings and our wishes to do better in the future. When I became a parent myself, I thought about these deep reservations, as well as the traditions from my own growing up, and spent some time searching for a Jewish community where I could share a sense of history, tradition, and community with my daughter and my son. But without the benefit of Google and key word searches that we have now, I came up empty, eventually bought a book about Judaism, and tried to impart whatever sense of history, background, and belonging to them that I could. Only time will tell how this will play itself out.

It is probably not an accident that I finally heard what my friend Jackie Liederman told me time and time again about the Humanistic Jewish congregation she belonged to only after my mother had died, and I was facing my father's looming mortality. Since I have become a member of KB, not only have I felt a closer connection to my family's heritage and learned more about Jewish history and traditions from our adult education classes, but the beautiful services have given me a time to stop and reflect on my life, to think about how I have come to where I am now, and to consider what is important to me in the future.

So, what is the meaning of this holiday? We have been taught that Yom Kippur is a time for self-reflection, self-evaluation, and self-correction. Yet each of us comes to this evening with our own ideas, experiences, and traditions. Many members of our congregation were deeply steeped in Jewish history, rituals, and traditions during their growing up, and were both

enriched but still dissatisfied with certain aspects of their experience. Others, like myself, were barely exposed to the rituals that helped to foster a sense of Jewish identity over the millennia, but still feel a profound need for connection to their past, to the traditions of those who came before them, and to a community. But both of these relationships to Judaism, strict adherence to specific guidelines and rituals, and shall we say, more nuanced approaches -- in the words of Jonathan Safran Foer, author of Everything is Illuminated, "the upright congregations and the slouchers" -- have been part of Jewish tradition through the centuries, and neither group can ultimately claim to be the "true Jew".

Our mutual appreciation of Jewish tradition, culture, celebration, and community, as well as our need for integrity in our rituals, sustain our congregation. But Jewish tradition has always fostered a sense of inquiry, personal introspection, and, of course discussion. At KB we continually question our assumptions, ideas, and conclusions. This process gives each of us an opportunity to consider our own beliefs and guiding principles. It is a dynamic and affirming progression, but still some parts of our Jewish tradition are as universally relevant and as compelling now as they were 2000 years ago. One of these is the often cited, simple, but elegant Hillel quote that is a central part of our service tonight.

If I am not for myself, who is for me?
And if I am only for myself, what am I?
And if not now, when?

KB is a diverse group in terms of background and life experience, as well as stage of life, and the way each of us takes and creates meaning from our services is uniquely and deeply personal. Our interpretation of Hillel's wise ideas is a case in point. While all of us understand the basic tenets of his philosophy -- to take responsibility for our own lives, to be of help to those around us and our greater community, and to live in the present -- our considerations of it will vary depending on the challenges we may face at any given time, as well as the facts of our personal histories.

As a young person, I took the wisdom of Hillel to mean that my responsibility was to prepare myself to have a fulfilling life, and to remember the importance of service to others as I set my course, as well as in my daily activities. My relationships with my family have always taken a central place in my life. I was fortunate in finding work that was challenging and stimulating, but still allowed me to participate fully in my children's lives when they were at home. This part of my life included many challenges, including the predictable stresses associated with balancing my commitment to my family with the responsibilities inherent in my work, as well as coping with the unexpected collapse of my first marriage while my children were quite young. Though aware of the need to take care of myself, as well as do my best for those around me, it was a constant struggle to manage these conflicting needs. Yet that part of my life contributed to many of my most precious memories.

I chose to live close to both of my parents during my adult years, and my contact with them remained frequent. Since their deaths, I have come to realize how nurturing and sustaining

those enduring connections were to me, even as their health declined and their needs grew. Their support of me during difficult times allowed me to persevere, and I hope that my attentiveness to them helped to ease some of their burdens as they faced the inevitable.

But my children are now grown and almost fully launched and my parents are gone. While continuing connections to my family and dear friends, my membership in communities like KB and my work continue to give meaning and purpose to me, I have certainly entered a new stage in my life. So how will I now take guidance from Hillel's adage? During this phase, how can I nurture myself, how can I be of service to others, and how will I get to it? Well, taking the time to reflect on this topic for tonight has helped, but I'm still working on that one, and I'll let you know as I make forward progress. But perhaps with the support of this community, and my own self-reflection, highlighted by my observance of this holiday, I'll get just a bit closer.

Thank you for allowing me to share my thoughts and feelings with you.