

Sally Landsburg
High Holidays 2016

It is 7:30 in the morning and I am walking my grandparents the four miles from their home to the Exchange Street Synagogue, as our Conservative synagogue was known (to differentiate it from the older Orthodox synagogue on Carrol Street, five blocks away.) As practicing Orthodox Jews, my grandparents would not drive on the High Holidays or Shabbat. We were going to shul for the first day of Rosh Hashanah and I was elected to walk them home as well.

A week later, my mother would walk with my grandparents after the Yom Kippur service because it would be dark before they got back to their home. My father and I would drive to my grandparents' home and wait there until my mother and grandparents got there. My father, who was a doctor, would check the answering service to see if there were any emergencies even though another doctor, a non-Jewish friend, was covering him for Yom Kippur and the two days of Rosh Hashanah. Then we would warm and eat the supper that my grandmother had already cooked on the day before. Mom and Dad and I would clean up while my grandparents rested and then my parents and I would drive to our house with me asleep in the back seat.

The day after Yom Kippur I went back to school to my puzzled friends who were mystified by my three-day absence. I could never explain it adequately because I didn't quite understand it myself, even though my family and I repeated the rituals every year.

The week before the Yom Kippur services, we, of course had celebrated Rosh Hashanah. At that time, I got to walk my grandparents' home because services ended around 1:00 p.m. Before we started to walk home, we detoured to walk down to the river so that we could throw our sins, symbolized by pieces of bread, into the water. Then, hopefully much relieved, we would go home and have a lovely lunch. I was particularly fond of roast chicken and potato kugel and that is what we usually had for a High Holiday treat.

According to the Jewish calendar this is the year 5776. At the time of which I speak, it was 5704 by the Jewish calendar. I was eleven years old at that time. The Second World War was in full swing. We knew what was happening to the Jews in Europe. My father, my mother's second husband, had been ransomed out of a concentration camp in 1939 by non-Jewish friends and patients and put on a ship to the United States. A New York cousin who was a cabinetmaker hired him off the boat at Ellis Island. My father had learned carpentry in the camp, and scarred by his experiences in Buchenwald, was afraid to tell anyone that he was a doctor upon his arrival in America. At some point, he finally told my cousin Barney that he was a doctor and Barney decided to fix him up with my mother who was divorced. They got married, and I was adopted by Dr. Breit.

The difference between my grandparents' first shul and their new one was incredible. The Orthodox shul was tiny. It held about forty people. Toward the back was a curtain that stretched from in front of the sanctuary to the back of the room. The women sat on one side of the curtain. The men sat on the other side of it.

In the new shul, the men sat downstairs and the women sat in the balcony upstairs. I was allowed to go upstairs to sit with my mother and grandmother and Aunt Eva, mom's sister, or downstairs with my father, grandfather, uncle Morris (my aunt's husband) and his brother, Uncle Joe. I remember going up and down those stairs a lot. Although I had started Hebrew School when I was eight years old, I still couldn't read it well enough to follow what was going on.

Mostly, I went up the stairs and down the stairs trying to figure out what they were crying about. At some point in the service, my Mom and grandma hauled the first of several handkerchiefs out of their pockets. When I asked what they were crying about, they told me they were grieving. They couldn't seem to tell me what they were grieving about. I would get in the seat in between them where I usually sat and held their hands. It was all I could figure out to do. They would kiss me and tell me that everything was fine and then cry some more.

It was really not until I started coming here to Adas Yoshuron that I began to understand what their tears were about. At some point during the prayers last year, something I was reading went to my heart and I began to cry. Something clicked for me emotionally that had never affected me before. This was the first time I had ever consciously begun to grieve during synagogue services. There were things that I had done that I now felt sincerely sorry about. Unkind acts, smartass remarks, judgmental behavior and a lot of me, me, me stuff. And then, as I cried out my regrets, I began to feel better. And I understood, for the first time in my life why my Mom and my Grandma were crying and what they were crying about. For the first time, I understood at a gut level the Yom Kippur cleansing, the sincere regrets and the desire to start again and do better.