

## HOW JEWISH VALUES SHAPED ME

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*You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*

At Bernice's seder table, surrounded by family, I'd recite this line patiently since I knew her matzah ball soup was coming. (Bernice, a dear family friend, was like a grandmother to me.) As a kid, I associated my "type" of Jewish as revolving around yummy food. Every holiday had special food we'd get to make and then eat, such as latkes or hamentaschen. At Hebrew school, we'd get bagels and pizza. Even Friday night, Shabbat dinner came with my mom's homemade challah. Consciously, my tie to religion seemed to revolve around food. At some point, when asked, I started describing myself as "not very Jewish," unless it came to the food, of course. Yet, unconsciously, Jewish values, such as loving strangers, guided me to who I have become.

Starting in kindergarten, Beth El's religious school exposed us to the idea of Tikkun Olam, repairing the world. We embarked on field trips to soup kitchens, thrift stores, and small nonprofits to help our broader community. These experiences taught us to appreciate our shared earth and our shared humanity. While these actions reinforced the ethics of Tikkun Olam, they also prompted me to ask questions, something Jews are certainly famous for. Encouraged by my teachers and parents, I've always asked many questions.

My second home is Thumpertown Beach in Eastham, Cape Cod. During an extensive card game of 'War,' my naive five-year-old self asked my dad why they don't solve real war with a card game because it would be so much simpler. I remember he laughed before shattering my innocent faith in humanity. With cards splayed at our sandy feet, my dad told me with pained optimism, "Ariel, sometimes adults make mistakes and instead of fixing them simply, they make them more complicated." My dad has always tried to answer my questions which has sparked my curiosity to question the world around me every day.

Further than asking questions, another monumental aspect of my Judaism is where I come from. Although I never met my grandmother, Henny Waldman, my Beth El community has connected me to her legacy. Henny personified our shared value of the power of education and tzedakah. When I was thirteen, I was worried about being ready in time for Bat Mitzvah with all my schoolwork and extracurriculars. In contrast to this, in 1938, at age thirteen, Henny was surrounded by the rising anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany and was not allowed to attend school. On February 4, 1943, Henny's entire family was arrested, deported from Breslau, and detained in the Theresienstadt ghetto in Czechoslovakia. On Henny's birthday, October 23, 1944, Henny's parents, Ruth and Erich Wolff, were deported to Auschwitz. At age twenty, Henny was one of the hundred women to survive Theresienstadt. In 1946, in the Deggendorf Displaced Persons Camp, as her family's sole survivor, Henny met Abraham Waldman, my grandpa. They came to America on separate boats, and she took night English classes while working in a fur factory.

When my grandpa attended graduate school at the University of Michigan, Henny took high school classes at night while working in the university hospital. In 1959, with four children, they moved to Sudbury. Henny took night classes at Framingham State College in the continuing education program until she was admitted and received a Bachelor's Degree in education with a concentration in Counseling. She continued her education at Boston University to earn her Master of Education Degree while teaching in elementary school. Despite being deprived of her own high school education, Henny proceeded to teach at Rindge and Latin High School in Cambridge. After a few years, she became the head of the Fundamental Core program to teach and counsel students no one expected to graduate due to serious family challenges and criminal histories. While raising four boys and teaching the Fundamental Core program, she pursued additional education towards a Ph.D. in Psychology at Boston University. At age fifty-nine, Henny was diagnosed with ovarian cancer, and on May 1 of 1987, we lost Henny when she was only sixty-one years old.

Henny embraced the Jewish values of education and tzedakah. The stories of Henny's determination and generosity told by this congregation and my family have become a fundamental part of who I am. Henny was truly dedicated to education, both in completing her own and enriching others.' My parents and Jewish community have urged me to continue her commitment to learning. Whenever I start to lose enthusiasm in school, I try to remember that doubling up in math and science courses isn't crazy at all compared to everything Henny accomplished. Although she had everything taken from her, she found immense gifts to give back to this world. Carrying forward her legacy in my middle name, I strive to be any portion of the person Henny was and still remains in our hearts. By looking up to Henny as my role model, I've approached the world through a Jewish lens without even realizing it.

My first ongoing act of tzedakah has been as a clinical assistant at the MetroWest Free Medical Clinic at Beth El. I started by helping my dad with the breakdown of the equipment at 9:00 pm when the clinic hours ended. However, I switched to being a clinical assistant when I saw how many patients waited outside, sitting in the line of chairs for hours. I see the small, yet tangible effects my actions have in making a difference in people's lives. These patients have nowhere else to turn and rely on the clinic for fundamental medical care. A mother once hugged me with tears in her eyes in appreciation for completing her son's physical exam so that he could go to school. Another time, after I faxed a woman's papers to an insurance company to secure her medical coverage, she told me that my calming voice comforted her during this stressful process. Even minor tasks, such as cleaning exam rooms, are important because they enable the healthcare professionals to have a greater impact by helping more patients. Dedicating a few hours each Tuesday night allowed me to continue the Jewish mission to love strangers.

In the fall of my junior year, after years of injuries, I finally had hip surgery since my surgeon told me that if I didn't, I would need a hip replacement surgery within five years. Juxtaposed with my injury experience was the realization that such surgery was not an option for the clinic's patients. Volunteering at the clinic changed my perspective about

healthcare and other substantial inequities in our country, especially in education, legal protections, and economic opportunities.

I have never fully reflected on the connection between my values and Judaism, yet as an avid feminist and environmentalist, a day rarely passes without learning or discussing relevant issues. By questioning the world around me, embracing Henny's determination, and carrying out Tikkun Olam with my community, these deep-rooted values have inspired my present self to play a part in fixing our broken world.

Right now, as an eighteen-year-old, I want to become a lawyer. The required seven years of school ahead of me certainly reflect educational values, but I first became interested in law when I found out you can legally change the world. Currently, after taking a year of Environmental Science, I'm interested in legally helping our planet's climate, but the options are endless. While I may be "not very Jewish," I am proud to realize that my heart been shaped by Jewish values. To honor my namesake, Henny, the Jewish people, and all the strangers in the world, I know my path, whatever it becomes, will sustain these values to ultimately change our world in my own way.