

Our Voices

From the Sisterhood of CSAIR

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I was a Bag Lady

Marjory Tolub *Originally written for the CSAIR 50th Anniversary Jubilee 2004*

I was a bag lady at CSAIR. It is not usual to have a bag lady walking around our synagogue, but that's what I did for a few years.

How did I become such a special lady? I never really aspired to be one. When my husband, Walter, became president of our synagogue in 1984, the Sisterhood president, Shirley Rothstein, very quietly suggested the president's wife should become a member. She invited me to join the Board. At the first meeting, she announced that ALL Board members must join a committee. I had retailing experience since that was my family's business. The committee consisted of 4-5 members, but when it came to meetings and shopping tips, EVERYONE was unable to participate. Suddenly I found myself alone, so I invented my vision of what this community needed.

On Sunday mornings, between 1984 and 1990, when there were special events — breakfasts, speakers or Hebrew School events — I went into a special closet and brought out THE BAGS! These were filled with Judaica of all sorts. There were books, toys, Hanukiot, Seder plates and other special holiday items. Some bags were light and some were sooo heavy. The bags also contained a cloth to make the display table look good, holding signs for various sales and, of course, the cash box. The table was set in the middle of the upstairs lobby, so everyone had to pass, and hopefully shop.

There were many volunteer Sisterhood members during that time. In 1990, the bag ladies retired and the Judaica Gift Shop was built with the able assistance of President Sam Sobel, Mildred Silfen and Sisterhood President Florence Wolpoff.

The Judaica Gift Shop has expanded into a full service store. There is a staff of wonderful volunteers who are there on Sunday mornings. They are Susanne Fruchter, Edith Oppenheimer, Sally Gensler, Anita Nerwen and Avital Katz. Recently, Dianne Meranus is volunteering too.

We attend the Gift Show at the Javitz Center twice a year. We fill the shop with art works from Israel and around the world. We assist with fitting that first tallit, a mezuzah for your home, finding that special kiddish cup, ketubah suitable for framing, and lots and lots of candles. We even use the store as a Judaica Museum to educate members about various holiday rituals.

The Judaica Gift Shop has filled a need for our synagogue and community and provided me with great satisfaction.

Hiddur Mitzvah - The principle of embracing a mitzvah through aesthetics.

The Sisterhood of CSAIR is thrilled to bring you the second issue of OUR VOICES. We hope you enjoy the diversity of articles — memories from experiences long ago and the recent past; a bit of CSAIR history; midrashic poems; thoughts to prickle our social conscience; and a movie review.

The only way to produce a third issue is with your submissions. Please contact Ellen Greenblatt at editor613@gmail.com with your stories, musings, memories, poems, prose, insights, ideas

Thank you.

Kol Nidre

Lillian Gewirtzman

Why me? I found myself wondering when offered the honor of holding the Survivor *Torah* for the *Kol Nidreh* service on the eve of *Yom Kippur*. Why me?

Born in a Polish *Shtetl*, and reared in an atmosphere where such honor was awarded only to the most pious and respected males of the congregation, my image of it, though altered by time, did not entirely fade into the background. I am a woman!

Though some of the women in my family, among them my mother — the daughter of Reb Israel Papier, who was a sage — were Torah educated, they knew their place. They wore their knowledge with pride — like a string of pearls around their neck — but flaunting it would have been immodest.

As a teenager at a Displaced Persons Camp school in post-war Germany I was exposed to “unisex” *Torah* reading while studying *Tanach*. It was our daily routine. The Book, more manageable than a Scroll, was our “History text!” It served many functions, the most important one was of restoring our self-image. We shed the mantle of “*Verfluchte Juden*” that had been imposed on us. We were the progeny of kings! We were learning about Our People! Our Country! Our Language! But what was left out is the music. (We never learned the trope.)

Though through my adult life in United States, my eyes and mind have become well accustomed to women reading Torah, wearing a *Talit*, or carrying a *Torah*, my emotional state is lagging behind. I love nothing more than a good Torah reading and I take almost personal pride in all the skilled young women in our congregation. Yet I feel awed and humbled by the very image of myself in a participating position.

Why me? Me performing the holy rite of “holding” a *Torah* throughout the Kol Nidre? Do I deserve it? Could I do it?

I tried an easy, and genuine way out. Having gone through radical surgery and radiation of my right underarm and side, I had been instructed not to lift anything heavier than five pounds with my right arm. And beyond that, my arm has never regained its full strength. My persisting discomfort, controlled by massive doses of medication, makes me an unreliable candidate for the task. But then, assured that I would be holding the less weighty Survivor *Torah* scroll, which has been rescued from a destroyed *Shtetl*, how could I refuse?

It was 6:20 in the evening. Two minutes to *Kol Nidre*. All the seats filled. The atmosphere, celebratory a few minutes earlier, turned solemn. “*B’Seifer Chaim* — May you be inscribed in the book of Life” we greeted one another in passing. Suddenly it was quiet. An aura of expectation. The cantor took her place. I fumbled for my seat. Not knowing the appropriate time to approach the *Bima* I stood in the aisle, confused. Where do I belong? Do I belong?

The helping hand of the usher brought me to the lineup of men who were each handed a *Torah*. From close up the scrolls looked enormous. I looked around for the smaller version, but there was none in sight. I was wondering if I ought to say something, but it was too late. The last of the scrolls, large and ornate under its silver crown, was passed into my outstretched

arms. I gripped it with all of my might, and gave myself a moment of hesitation for the appropriate response. Do I say, “No, it’s too heavy?” Too heavy I tripped over the words. “Torah too heavy...” Could I even think that?

“The *Torah* has always been heavy, yet we Jews have not let go of it,” my metaphor took dominance of my mind. I resolved to brace myself for the experience. Clutching the scroll tight against my body, I distributing its bulk as much as I could between my two arms and arched my body backward to transfer some of its weight to my lower back. After all, it is only a fifteen minute service, I kept telling myself. I can do it! I will not give up! I resorted to a Yoga coping technique, surrendering myself to a meditation on the flow of the *Kol Nidrei* chant. But it was another chant I was hearing. An echo strange but familiar. There was a man singing. An old man. His voice a lament. My grandmother was crying. She always cried on Yom Kippur. I was in an old, *Beis Midrash*, in the town of Grabowiec, in the upper balcony, with the women; my mother, my two grandmothers, my aunts, and other children cousins? I was running up and down the steep staircase. It was OK for a little girl to go down to the men’s section ... I was five years old. My uncles and boy-cousins were there. And my father, who will kiss me and tell me to go back to mommy. But best of all, there was *Zeide Mordechai*, with the huge *Talit* I loved to crawl under, who later, in Azerbaijan, under the direst conditions, never gave up trying to teach me the *Mode Ani* — which I continuously resisted. *Zeide Mordechai*, with whom I later studied Torah at a rickety table at a DP camp in Germany, who glowed with pride in me, telling his friends that “I was as smart as a boy!”

I came back to myself during the last phrases of Cantor Elizabeth’s beautiful soprano *Kol Nidrei*. There I stood, snuggling against what I believed to be the *Survivor Torah*. And for me it was! I didn’t cry, but my face and blouse were stained with tears. I felt alone ... the last survivor a representative ... witness that there once was a *Shtetl* named Grabowiec ... with synagogues ... and Rabbis ... and large extended families ... with children racing up and down staircases in High Holidays. All gone up in smoke. Maydanek??? Belzec??? I do not know. There isn’t even a gravesite I could visit to say *Kaddish* for the town. Maybe I am here tonight for just that. Erect and strong-armed. Stubbornly holding on to the Torah as my people have done for generations.

Itgadal Vitkadash.

Movie Review: Far from The Tree

Ellen Greenblatt

When a child is born, we wish three things for this new life: torah, chuppah and massim tovim learning, marriage and good deeds. But what if the child is incapable of fulfilling these wishes? Do we write them off? Let them know our disappointment in them? Blame ourselves? Accept them?

These are the issues discussed in the documentary *Far From the Tree* based on Andrew Solomon's book of the same name. Five stories are told, interwoven with Solomon's own story. As a biological mother, a mother by marriage and a bubbe of six that were all born after our family was blended (so just try to tell me that two of them are not "really" by grandchildren), I found this movie both incredibly sad and incredibly uplifting.

For Torah, we meet a young man living in a group home who has Down Syndrome. When he was born, his parents were told to put him in a home and forget about him. He would never speak, walk or have any cognitive function. We see him now living in a group home with two other men (they call themselves the three musketeers), working and talking about his life. He admits he can't distinguish fantasy from reality (he wants to go to Norway to meet Elsa from *Frozen*), but is otherwise pleased with his life. His mother talks about her fight, along with her late husband, to get her son all the help he can absorb, refusing to accept the hopeless life predicted by the doctors. I was uplifted by his success, but also saddened over his mother's worry about him after she is gone.

Chuppah is seen in Solomon's own story. When he came out to his parents about his homosexuality, they let him know their disappointment and embarrassment. As the movie progresses, Solomon talks about trying to "fix" himself with dubious medical treatments. With time, an evolution in societal thinking and the love of a good man, Solomon not only accepts, but celebrates his difference. "What is considered a disability is an identity." Even Solomon's father offers a l'chayim.

An autistic boy wants to do good deeds, but he's locked into a world that creates a barrier between what he wants and what he can accomplish. His mother is torturing herself over what she could have done during her pregnancy to cause this — too much bed rest?; her diet? We see his father's heartbreaking difficulty in talking about what he had hoped for his child. Ultimately, a therapist finds a key to allow the boy to communicate. While the underlying problem is not solved, he can finally "talk" to his parents.

What we wish for the children doesn't always gel with their reality. But we love them. We wish the best for them. And we wish for our own understanding of how to make that happen.

On Billionaires and Homeless Children in NYC

Graciela Berger Wegsman

I was shopping at one of my favorite stores yesterday, looking at the shoes section, when I overheard a conversation in Spanish that made me sad and angry all at once. The store is a T.J. Maxx, a chain that offers great prices for well-known brands of clothing and apparel. And who doesn't like a good sale?

I was checking some shoes and trying to find the shelf with my size when I noticed a woman sitting on a stool and talking to a friend. *"No pude dormir bien ayer,"* she was saying to someone on her cell phone. She didn't sleep well the day before. I was not trying to be nosy, but she was there talking like nobody else could hear or understand what she was saying. *"Las cucarachas no me dejaron dormir. Cada vez que traté de apagar la luz, las cucarachas se subían a mi cama,"* she was saying to a friend, and I understood why she didn't care if someone could hear. She was very upset because she couldn't turn off the lights at night to go to sleep because the moment she did it the cockroaches began climbing to her bed.

The woman was well dressed and I can bet she had a full time job, perhaps a job that pays \$15 an hour or perhaps \$30,000 a year. But she was poor by New York City standards. This was not the poverty I encountered in Argentina where I saw people without shoes or torn clothes. This was a different kind of poverty that is easier to hide.

Why didn't she change apartments, you may wonder. The answer is that it is very difficult right now to find an affordable apartment to rent. In New York City, clothing is not expensive; you can go to a thrift shop and find good clothes for few dollars. But what is extremely expensive is housing. There is a lack of affordable housing. This is a big crisis and I don't think any politician alone can solve it. I'm not only talking about Manhattan but about the other boroughs as well. The same is going on in Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island and the Bronx.

Many landlords require having an annual income equal to 40 times the amount of rent. If your rent is \$2,000 you need to show an income of \$80,000. That makes it very hard for low income people to find affordable apartment for rent in any part of the city and why so many families are homeless. Even with full time jobs they have to choose between paying rent and eating. **"In March 2018, there were 62,974 homeless people, including 15,393 homeless families with 23,110 homeless children,** sleeping each night in the New York City municipal shelter system. Families make up three-quarters of the homeless shelter population," according to The Coalition for the Homeless. And about the causes —**"Research shows that the primary cause of homelessness, particularly among families, is lack of affordable housing.** Surveys of homeless families have identified the following major immediate, triggering causes of homelessness: **eviction; doubled-up or severely overcrowded housing; domestic violence; job loss; and hazardous housing conditions.**" For more information you can visit the website <http://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org>.

In New York, there are at least 23,000 children who are homeless. These children go to school and come back to a shelter to sleep. How are their lives? How can they study in those conditions? On the other hand **"With a total wealth of \$3 trillion, New York, the economic hub of the United States, became the wealthiest city in the world,"** according to the New World Wealth. It is also the same city where 82 billionaires have a home, the most in any city in the

world, according to Forbes. A billion dollars is a thousand million dollars. It is a ridiculous amount of money.

There is something wrong about such inequality in New York City. A city with three trillion dollars in total private wealth and kids are homeless? Sometimes we are used to things and we don't pay attention. On Sunday I was in synagogue and I saw a poster that I probably passed before many times. It had some words by theologian Abraham Heschel: "A Jew is asked to take a leap of action rather than a leap of faith." It left me thinking ...

Until next time. Keep reading. Share your thoughts.

Graciela Berger Wegsman is an award-winning playwright, journalist and translator. As a journalist, Graciela has written articles for many newspapers and magazines in Argentina, Israel and the USA. She has been a frequent contributor to the New York Daily News for the last several years, specializing in Latino culture. She writes her On Being Jewish and Latina Blog.

Midrash Poems

Marcia Lane

In 2010, I took a class studying the Book of Samuel at my seminary, the Academy for Jewish Religion. One of the assignments was to create a midrash that commented in a new way on some aspect of the biblical text. Students wrote songs, one made a woodblock print, someone brought in film clip from High Noon! I wrote a series of 29 poems — sort of like Edgar Lee Masters' Spoon River Anthology — that would give the characters the opportunity to "speak for themselves."

Bathsheba

Three days.

Three days in a row

I took my leisure on my rooftop.

Three days I waited to be seen.

God put a picture in my dreams

Of a child –

fair, wise, calm.

I knew it wasn't to be my husband's.

(A good man, kind, but dull.

Faithful. Faithful to a fault.)

It wouldn't be easy.

There would be pain, certainly. Maybe loss.

But in the end I would have this son.

The little sage of my dreams.

The king was just a means to an end.

(And the end, the son, would also be king.)

And so, when he sent for me –

after three days of preening –

I was ready.

Goliath

When I was little -
no, I never was little -
when I was a child the other boys frightened me.
My mother said, "Dear child, you are afraid
of them?
They fear you!"

One day I was tall. Then I was taller.

The soldiers said, "Don't worry. You'll be fine.
Just roar. Roar like a lion, and you'll be fine." So I did.
I didn't like the armor. It chafed.
But they were right. I roared and the other,
braver men left me alone.

But that little sweet fellow stood there
so tiny, so not afraid.
I would have liked to play with him.
But

one minute I was tall
then I was not.

The Joy of Being Yourself

Barry Grief

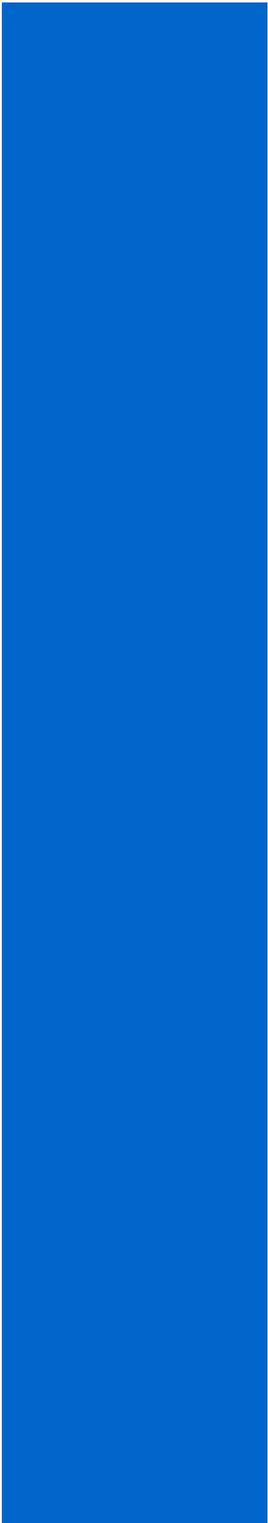
My wife Ellen and I spent all of Sukkot at Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center in Falls Village, Connecticut. With Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and the rigors of Teshuvah behind us, we were pumped for the joy that is Succot. Of course joy cannot be manufactured by dint of will. However, the right frame of mind and a conducive environment can be helpful in this regard. Isabella Freedman provides a multifaceted environment that is conducive to generating joy.

The grounds are adorned with surrounding trees rife with autumnal colors and a lake at its center. Cabins, yurts and most importantly decorated Succots define the landscape. The food is plentiful and of superior quality and caters to all tastes – whether you are a carnivore, vegetarian or of vegan persuasion, you will surely be satisfied and then some. The davening is spirited and musical with Hallel's that are full of rhythm and percussion that, if you are up for it, can launch you into an altered state of consciousness. Meaningful D'var Torahs are offered throughout the day.

As compelling as the above is in providing a context for a joyous experience, it doesn't capture the essence of what Isabella Freedman represents. Isabella Freedman's signature is not just its tolerance but its acceptance and even honoring of diversity. This is true across differences in level/kind of religious observance, political orientation and sexual/gender preferences. There are three religious services to choose from — Orthodox (led by an unusual Chabad Rabbi whose insightful sermons are sprinkled with relevant references to Emily Dickenson, Nietzsche, Sandy Koufax), Egalitarian (like CSAIR), and Renewal (with instruments and repetitive chanting). Though the Rabbis leading these respective services occupy separate spaces during davening and view Jewish practice differently, they regularly join together as ONE at meals in song and respectful dialogue.

Perhaps the most poignant moment reflecting Isabella Freedman embracing diversity and individual differences was at a lecture on sacred moments. The leader of the discussion asked if anyone would like to describe a sacred moment in their life. There were number of predictable responses, like the birth of a first child, but then one person had the courage to reply that she had just finished transitioning and had her first aliyah as a female. Nobody in the room flinched; it was as if someone had just announced she had switched from preferring Rice Crispies to Cheerios. Though many of us could not fully identify with the gender change, we overtly or silently saluted it.

Certainly joy can be the consequence of many different kinds of experience. What I'm suggesting here is that one context for joy is the safety to be authentic, to be yourself especially in environments where your proclivities are different from the majority. It was sad for Ellen and me to leave IF and to return to our everyday environment where too often Muslims are treated with suspicion, Jews from one denomination discredit Jews from another denomination, politics are so polarized that demonization of the other is standard and transgender individuals are deprived of their civil rights and targets of violence. The ethos at Isabella Freedman is "All Streams, One Source" — despite our differences we were all created by the same and only God and hence of equal worth. It is wonderful to be able to escape to Isabella Freedman for Succot (or any of their other fine programs throughout the year) to be part of such a civilized and empathic environment. The question I am left with is how we can all confront and challenge



those powerful forces in society who treat people who are different as “objects” as “its” rather than as human beings created in the image of God. How can we make the rest of the world more like Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center.