

CELEBRATING OUR STORIES
Jewish Life in Ann Arbor

Jeff Bernstein and Caroline Helton
Recorded April 21, 2013

5:26-8:35

Caroline: When we got here, he started going to synagogue. When I joined him, I started going to synagogue with him, even though not being Jewish. I love religions and had always been fascinated with Judaism. Not long after we started going to synagogue together—not long after I got here, Matt started studying Hebrew with Leslie Morris, who he met through our congregation. Her husband, Mike, also wanted to study Hebrew, but he wasn't as far along as Mike and Leslie were.

We just decided to get together as two couples, and we met Mike and Leslie, obviously, through Beth Israel. Once a week, we would go to their house or they would come over to our house. Mike and I would work through this textbook at our level, and he and Leslie would work through the Hebrew textbook at their level. We became very good friends with this older couple. They now have grandchildren and our daughter is just 14. It was an inter-generational friendship through Beth Israel.

And also, through this time—that's one thing that I think religious congregations are so important—to provide you that inter-generational context and friendship. I also really happen to like old people a lot, so I made friends with one of our oldest congregants, who was, even then, I think—is Miriam Sampson in her 90s?

Jeff: She just turned 100, so she must have been mid-80s.

Caroline: Miriam and I used to sit together in synagogue. I happen to be a professional singer. She would lean over and tell me, "You should be up on the Bimah leading services. You have such a beautiful voice."

Jeff: Although she probably said it a lot louder, so then everyone could hear it.

Caroline: Yeah, she probably did. She kinda talked like that, "Oh, Caroline." Anyway, she's a wonderful lady. She said, "You should be up on the Bimah." I said, "Well, I can't, I'm not Jewish." She said, in her

typical fashion, "Why not?" And by that time, I had been studying Hebrew. I had been a part of the congregation enough to where people was assuming I was Jewish. That question really, really shifted something in my mind. And also, Matt and I were considering starting a family and we had already agreed that we would raise kids Jewish. So that was—and we had made friends in the congregation. We still didn't know you guys too much yet by that time.

Jeff: Probably not by then.

Caroline: It was so wonderful to be a part of a congregation. First of all, when I was converting, I had the support of the congregation. Our Rabbi, Rabbi Dobrusin is a wonderful person, and really was probably one of the main reasons why I wanted to convert. Just to see his Jewish example, and to be a part of this community that I felt so at home in.

10:44-11:28

Jeff: I remember when you were pregnant with Hava and she was born. Then Steve and Rachel with Segal was right around that time. Then Zachary came along a few months later. That really created that community around here, because it's—

Caroline: In fact, there were so many people pregnant at one time that all sat in the same section, we called it the “fertile crescent.”

Jeff: That's interesting because there was a group that used to sit—this was out where you sit off on the side. There was a group that sat back near where we were that just seemed to have a whole bunch of children. They were all raising each other's children. We really didn't know which child belonged to who, so we used to call that area the “commune.”

Caroline: *[Laughter]*

Jeff: We were a fertile congregation for a time.

25:23-26:24

Caroline: For me, I just—I feel like it's so important to know where your spiritual home is and where your community is. I had this realization one time when Hava was little and she was—I guess she was around six or seven. She was old enough to be able to go off in services—go off on her own and come back.

I had the realization, you know, because just like in every congregation, whether it's a church or a synagogue, people tend to have the places where they always sit. I realized that Hava could go off on her own because she knew where to come back. She knew where we were sitting. That, to me, is what a synagogue community means. You know where you're sitting, and it gives you the strength and the independence to go out and explore.

26:54-28:08

Jeff: It's funny you say that because I'm thinking about time and the sacred times that we have. Realizing that for us certainly in our group of friends and then for countless other groups at the synagogue, just thinking about the routines we've gotten into over the years. If it's the first day of Rosh Hashanah, where are we?

Caroline: We are at each other's houses.

Jeff: Right.

Caroline: Rushing off to get to the service in time to get a good seat.

Jeff: That's right. You know, the first night we're always at our house. The first afternoon of Rosh Hashanah, we're always at yours. Break the fast at Steve and Michelle's. Just thinking about—

Caroline: Right, so there's this rhythm.

Jeff: This rhythm that if I'm at Steve and Michelle's, it must be—

Caroline: It must be the break fast.

Jeff: We must be breaking the fast. If we're at Peretz and Laura's for a potluck, we must be starting the fast.

Caroline: That's Shavuot at Peretz and Laura's.

Jeff: Right, or the dairy extravaganza.

Caroline: The dairy dessert extravaganza.

Jeff: There's sort of that—I have really come to value that rhythm that we have. In a community of friends where we know that if it's the holidays, we're going to be getting together.

33:45-34:57

Jeff:

When I read so much stuff about young Jews un-affiliating or independent Minyanim that are not connected to synagogues and all the challenges that synagogues are facing in this context. I read it, I mean, from my perspective as a board member. Of course, disaffiliation, people joining independent Minyanim and not joining brick-and-mortar synagogues is a challenge to the synagogue community. Hell, if nothing else, it's a challenge to our budget.

But I think about that, and then I think about the fact that you can't create those communities out of nowhere. Having the synagogue here, knowing that when something good is happening, there's a place. The celebration has an address. When something bad is happening, knowing that you make one phone call to the rabbi, and so much stuff is just put into motion from a logistical standpoint, but also just from a caring standpoint.