

Today I am a fountain pen. Some reflections on being a feminist child in the 1950s

Today, I got an email from cousin Jim, one of my 35 first cousins. How a paying member of Planned Parenthood has 35 first cousins is a story for another time. Jim informed me and my 3 sibs that Rauh Jewish History Program and Archives was looking for information from Jews who had been members of the Jewish community in Brownsville, Pa. Well that was me, us—my brothers and sister, my parents and grandparents (of blessed memory). I spent my childhood at Ohave Israel.

I was born in 1947 and was held captive in Brownsville until 1965, when thank God I finished high school. I ran like hell to get away from that place, a backwater mud hole on the banks of the Monongahela River, south of Pittsburgh, south of the civilized sector (as I called it). South of any place I wanted to be or be from. What do you do when you are an 11 year old card carrying feminist, who by that age had renounced all forms of traditional Judaism or traditional anything, who renounced sex segregation, a current member of the ACLU, a person who has a bobble head of Ruth Bader Ginsberg glued to the refrigerator? I never looked back, at least not until today.

The synagogue always had a visiting rabbi. I think it was because no self-respecting scholar or teacher or anyone who was not the worst student in the class would ever set foot near the banks of the muddy Monongahela without being able to exit this town any slower than I made my departure. One year, we had a very young, adorable first year rabbi. He had red curly hair and I was smitten. I think I was about 8 and he was only 20 years older than me. I don't know what ever happened to him. Nothing happened to me. But I can still remember his face and those red curls.

Obviously, I hated growing up in Brownsville. As one of only 3 Jewish kids in our high school, I never felt like I belonged there. I had asked my parents Hy and Syl (of blessed memory) to send me to boarding school. This was like the question from son, also named Hy, when he asked me at age six if he could have a brother or sister and I told him that I was in peri-menopause and that Dad had had a vasectomy. Obviously "NO".

There were so many awkward moments. We Jewish kids were sent for a special Shabbat weekend in another Orthodox community, also in Western Pa. I made the mistake of turning off the bathroom lights and flushing the toilet. Shit. I felt so ashamed.

The Brownsville public school, certainly not the equivalent of my later Ivy League education, decided to send the students to 'religious' education. On Fridays, I was supposed to go to the synagogue, to get my share of abuse. As the reader can see, I was already a Dylan fan and already obnoxious. I played hooky. I got caught. Not to relinquish my 16 year old civil rights, I phoned the director of the county school district. With my best chutzpa, I informed the director that he was violating recent decisions of the Supreme Court as well as our Constitution. I ended up attending religious education.

Passover was the Festival of Tush Numbness. There would be community seders. Celebrating freedom? We were Orthodox, which meant by age six I'd have to sit leaning for five hours in a starched dress when I wanted to be wearing my jodhpurs or my Davey Crocket outfit. I figured out that the bad boy in the Hagada was a metaphor about me. Who knew? I knew.

And then there was walking to the Shul on the Sabbath and High Holidays. Deductively, I figured that Moses had no car, so I was being punished. On one of these long marches, I wished that my mother would fall down. And she fell down. (You can't make these things up.) Another dose of guilt and shame.

How my parents' friends, the Bergers would eat shrimp at the best/ only restaurant in Brownsville on Saturday night but kept more sets of dishes than the bridal registry at Macy's for the rest of week was beyond me. I knew I wasn't immoral to have a milkshake with my hamburger at Fiddles Grill, but shame and guilt would upset my tender GI tract.

I used to hide in my room on the Sabbath so that I could write, draw, and do math. I figured that God was watching me but that He didn't care. But Aunt Sadie (of blessed memory) cared. She took lessons from the Wrath of Khan.

And on another Sabbath, Aunt Fanny (also of blessed memory) found me riding my tricycle. Did Moses transport the tablets on a tricycle down from Mount Sinai? Another sin to feel guilty about.

Early Friday evenings the phone would ring. I'd answer. Always a man from the Shul. "Not enough men for the minyan. Could my father (of most blessed memory) and my brothers come?" I'd hang up.

Then there was the time that I was back in Brownsville during a college break that Aunt Milly called. "It was the annual spaghetti dinner fund raiser. Could I serve spaghetti?" Of course I responded "I don't serve spaghetti." I hung up.

In 11<sup>th</sup> grade, the only other Jewish girl in my high school class, who should remain anonymous, announced to our high school Problems of Democracy class that I was not a good Jew. I took great offense. Not only was I now the high school class mate who killed Christ, but now, because I did not observe whatever it was I was supposed to, I was responsible for the Holocaust. Maybe only a Catholic could have felt more guilty.

My little brother Lee was the last bar mitzvah at the synagogue. I was nine years older and by that time I lived far far away attending the aforementioned Ivy League college. I resentfully attended, but not without much ideologic fanfare, citing "separate but equal is never equal; I refuse to sit in the back of the bus". Right after his bar mitzvah the synagogue closed, transforming the location into a gun shop. From AZA to NRA. Go figure.

No, I was not a good Jew, not by Brownsville Jewish community standards. You, the reader, did not need several advanced Ivy League degrees to figure that out. So I left and never looked or came back.

But as I am now a writer, albeit only for one day and after the passage of over 50 years, I came in touch with all that I still miss. I miss the other two Jews from my high school. I miss all the class mates from Sunday School. All of us left Brownsville. I miss all the people who were my "aunts" and "uncles", who cared about me. Of course, I miss my parents and grandparents. I miss knowing people who have known me all my life. They loved me and I loved them.

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