

The Jewish Time Traveler
Remarks by Dr. Arlene B. Holtz on Erev Rosh Hashanah 5776

I am a Jewish time traveler, and tonight I'd like to tell you my story.

Although I was born in South Philadelphia in the mid 20th century, I grew up in the late 19th century probably in a place like Kishinev in Bessarabia. In our home the language was Yiddish, the food was Eastern European and the religion was strictly Orthodox. My little legs carried me to *shul*, and then up the steps where I peered down at the mumbling men and was happy to be able to walk around and even talk in a whisper. God was a regular guest at home.

While I was still in elementary school we moved to Wynnfield and I entered the 20th century. There was more English spoken at home, though the food was pretty much the same. We still walked to our new Conservative synagogue, and we still lived in Jewish time. Every *Shabbos* my mother consulted the Jewish calendar provided yearly by the local undertaker to see when to light candles and when to celebrate every holiday.

As a young adult I went to Israel and fell in love with the country where living in Jewish time was the norm. I have a Yiddish name, Bryna Perel, but in Israel it sounded very old fashioned, so I called myself Renah, and when I got home I asked my father if I could change my Jewish name. Without looking up from his dinner he said, "I went to *shul* when you were born and told God your name. If you want to change it, you tell Him."

As I grow into adulthood I had to confront a secret I had kept from everyone, even myself. I am gay. I began to hear the slights and denigrations towards gays by members of the congregation. I heard the stories about *fegalehs*, and each word caused a wound inside me. So I tumbled into darkness like a spacecraft that's lost the signal from mother Earth. I was distraught and inside myself I cried out to God and said, "This is Bryna Perel bat Reuven v'Devorah, why did you make me this way?" I listened as the Prophet Elijah listened in the desert for the *qol dmamah daqah* the "still small voice." I listened...and there was silence. So I fell out of Jewish time; there was no Shabbat, no holidays, no synagogue, and I lived like this for many years.

Our Jewish texts contain stories when a messenger arrives and impacts the narrative. My messenger was about 4' 10" and a long time Keneseth Israel member. Her name was Dorothy Freedman—may her memory be a blessing-- and she was the mother of my friend Morty Freedman. Shortly after I met her she invited me to come to KI for High Holiday services and with great hesitation I complied. I, who had never heard one note of music played on a Shabbat or a holiday, was lifted by the majesty of the music during the service and challenged by the intellectual content of Rabbi Maslin's sermons. I liked KI, but I didn't know if KI would like me.

To help answer my question Dorothy took me to a Reform Biennial where I heard Rabbi Alexander Schindler -- of blessed memory-- give his Presidential Address in 1993. Here is what he said:

We are pledged to the concept that we are one family. We will not speak of “them” and “us,” as though gay men and women were descended from a distant planet. They are our fellow congregants, our friends and committee members, and yes, our leaders, both professional and lay. Some of them are our sisters and brothers, our daughters and sons. Ours is a commitment to re-forming of Judaism for the Jewish people, for *all* Jews and not just for some.¹

I rose to my feet as tears ran down my cheeks to applaud with thousands of others, and in that moment I stopped tumbling in the darkness and reconnected to Jewish time. I had heard the still small voice, and it was his. As I’ve reflected on that moment I’ve realized that in our time the voice that comforts and challenges us to move out of the darkness must come from the Divine that is in each of us.

I am now living in the 21st century. If you came to our home on *Shabbat* your *Shabbat* meal might be jerk chicken because my partner was born in Jamaica and our home has a Caribbean flair. However, every *Shabbat* we welcome in the angels as we light candles. We remember God’s creation as we recite the *kiddush* and thank God for our food as we recite the *motzi*.

Most recently Rabbi Sussman gave me the honor of speaking about the Supreme Court’s decision on marriage equality. That evening I again heard the still small voices – from Rabbi Sussman and our clergy, and from many of you who came to me following the service with words of kindness and acceptance. I cherish that memory and it helps to keep me strong.

It’s time for me to move on; I wish all you Jewish time travelers safe journeys, and I wish everyone the “still small voices” to comfort and challenge you along your way.

Shanah tova.

¹ Schindler, Rabbi Alexander M. *Lifelong learning: The Path to Informed Choices*. Presidential Address, 62nd General Assembly of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. San Francisco, October 23, 1993.