My American Jewish Life: Noshing with Friends

This American Jewish Life

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By Enid Lefton

I was born 61 years ago in Cleveland, Ohio at Mt. Sinai Hospital. I always thought it made perfect sense that I was born in a Jewish hospital. Since my life was surrounded by everything Jewish, how could I have been born anywhere else?

I was the middle child, the only girl, painfully shy, of a typical 1950's family. My parents were high school sweethearts, first generation American Jews. They married after the war. My father and his brother went into the fur business, like their father. They changed their name from Lefkowitz to Lefton so that it would be easier for my uncle to travel in the south selling his wares. Neither came from very religious homes, but there was never a question about their Jewish identity.

My father Frank, and his brother Irv, later went into business with their brother-in-law, Paul, who owned a delicatessen in the old neighborhood. That neighborhood would, less than a decade later after the Jews moved east to the suburbs, become a ghetto and the center of race riots. My family moved to the suburbs when I was 4, to the house I grew up in. A few years later, Paul divorced my Aunt Sarah, moved to California, and sold the deli to my father and uncle. They changed the name to *Lefton's* and moved it to the suburbs, just a mile from our house.

Lefton's was the center of life for my extended family, and for the Jewish community. My father worked seven days a week and he worked the dinner and late night shift. So the only way I really spent much time with my father was at the restaurant. Before fast food restaurants took over the landscape, going out to eat was a special occasion. And going to a restaurant was a night out. On Saturday nights, the restaurant was open until 3 AM. People went to the movies, or the theater, and then came to *Lefton's* to have a nosh, to sit and laugh and schmooze with friends for hours. I have fond memories of sitting on my parent's bed every Saturday night watching my mother dress and put on her makeup to go to work at 10 PM to hostess for the crowds of Jews who made dining at *Lefton's* a weekly tradition. And this was my parents' social life. Everyone knew Frank and Corky, and Irv and Esther Lefton. My parents hardly ever went out, but they were constantly in the center of Jewish social life.

The restaurant was located at the intersection of three suburbs – University Heights, Beachwood, and South Euclid. Every cop from each of those communities ate at *Lefton's* during their shift where the coffee was always free and the food always half price for police. Being a Lefton had its privileges. I remember a friend of mine telling me how he had been stopped for speeding and when he told the cop he was on his way to visit Enid Lefton, the cop let him go.

Once my brothers and I were older, my mother expanded from just Saturday night hostessing, to cashiering every evening. My parents, my aunts and uncles, and all my cousins worked in the restaurant. I started out sitting on a stool behind the cash register, helping my father push the buttons on the old mechanical register that dinged when the sale was rung up. He taught me how to line up the dollar bills in the cash drawer, all heads up, with the heads all facing in the same direction. This is a habit I continue to this day. When I was about 12, I was bussing tables and working the soda fountain. I can't tell you how many chocolate phosphates I made over the years, but I know I was good at it. I could keep the

bubbly head at a minimum so you really got your money's worth. I eventually became a waitress which is what I did every summer through high school and the first couple years of college until I found a way to stay in Columbus for the summer instead of coming home to Cleveland. I did that by getting a job in Columbus…as a waitress.

Many years later I realized that I had learned important lessons in social structure from working in my father's restaurant. The restaurant was divided into three distinct areas. In the front was the delicatessen. This was staffed by older Jewish men and the boy cousins. I can still picture them all in their white shirts and greasy aprons. These men were paid well and eventually, much to my father and uncle's chagrin, joined a union.

The middle section was the restaurant which was staffed by gentile, working class women. These women were the classic professional waitresses. Sassy, in their starched waitress uniforms with order pad and pink number 2 pencil in hand. Doing what they had to do to make the tips. Shelly and I, the girl cousins, found this our base of operation. Hanging with Mary Borden, Louise, and the rest, groveling for tips and pretending to like the demanding customers. I think that waiting tables in my father's restaurant and taking care of the regular customers is what made me sick of being around Jews and was partly responsible for me later running away from the Jewish community for many years.

The back section of the restaurant was the kitchen which was staffed entirely by black men. These men were underpaid, disrespected, and mistrusted. It was expected that Lee Bell or Bob, the main cooks, would go on a bender every now and then. The kitchen door was padlocked so that no one could sneak steaks out. Whenever there was a delivery, my cousin Jack would have to be called to unlock the door. These men were locked in a kitchen, surrounded by stoves and grease. Thankfully, there was never any kind of emergency, but now it is hard for me to imagine that anyone ever thought that was a good idea. That kitchen was the Triangle Waist Factory waiting for a tragedy.

So that is the lesson of life I learned from the restaurant. Jewish men are the most respected. Shiksas are hard workers and okay to be around, at least at work, and black men are the lowest and can't be trusted and don't deserve a safe working environment. It wasn't until I was a much older adult, with an educated awareness of classism and racism, that I understood how I was subtly trained on everyone's place in the world. At least in our isolated little world where the Jews were in control. I also understand now that outside that bubble, we, as Jews, in the 50's and 60's weren't in control. So creating this safe world was a way my parents, and other adults in our community, isolated us from the anti-Semitism that was everywhere else.

Growing up, and even to some extent to this day, being a Lefton meant being an important part of the community. *Lefton's* was a gathering place, a center for Jewish life in the Cleveland suburbs. Unless you were a devotee of *Solomon's* or *Corky and Lenny's*, the other two delis in the area, *Lefton's* was, as a Jewish Clevelander, where you went to spend time with friends and to wallow in your favorite soul food. Kishkas, knadelach, white fish, kippers, creamed pickled herring, flanken, bagels (the real kind – no blueberries or jalapeños) with nova lox, egg creams and dill pickles. To me, this was being Jewish.

I grew up in a Jewish bubble. Everyone I knew was Jewish. Except for David Clark, the one non-Jewish student in my sixth grade class. I remember David because he was an oddity to me. My junior high closed for the high holidays because all of the students were Jewish. My high school was more diverse…maybe 20 or 25% of the students were non-Jewish…but not my circle of friends. All of my

neighbors were Jewish, my parents' friends, even our dry cleaning delivery man. I was sheltered from the fact that I was a minority everywhere else. In my suburban life, being a Jew was the norm.

I attended religious school every year until my confirmation in ninth grade. We belonged to a Reform temple which happened to be right across the street from our restaurant. My family was not observant. Of course we lit Chanukah candles. And we observed every major holiday with a big family dinner. Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, meant large family gatherings and lots of delicious food…Grandma Becky's gefilte fish and matzo ball soup, which in later years Aunt Sarah prepared in restaurant sized pots in the store's kitchen, brisket, the best dill pickles…the works. Pesach too. Never a seder, but a big family dinner and always an after dinner show that my cousins and I prepared in our grandparent's rec room. The Jewish holidays to me were special evenings, the few moments in the year the restaurant was closed and the whole family, aunts and uncles, grandparents, cousins, all gathered to share that special meal.

My most memorable Yom Kippur was the year the beef tenderloin caught on fire. My mother and I were upstairs in her bedroom, getting ready for the rest of the family to arrive. We noticed that the air was getting kind of smoky. We went downstairs to the kitchen and when my mother opened the oven door, I saw flames shooting out. She quickly shut the oven door, phoned the fire department, and we ran outside. I remember the horror on my mother's face as the firefighters pulled their large hose into the kitchen. Fortunately, the fire stayed confined to inside the oven and they were able to put it out with a fire extinguisher. All that was left of our holiday feast was a white powder covered hunk of charred meat. In our neighborhood, the only thing that was open on erev Yom Kippur were Chinese restaurants. So that was always known as the night we had Chinese food for Yom Kippur. I always thought that should become a tradition, but it never caught on.

After my so called religious education was over I stayed connected to our Temple by joining the Temple Youth Group. There I found a true home. My fondest memories of my high school years were the weekend campouts, the NELFTY conclaves in Rochester and Olean, New York. And a week spent in upstate New York at the NFTY Leadership Camp. I edited the Youth Group newsletter, was the camp song leader, served as Vice President, and wrote a parody called "Youth Group on the Roof". This was the fictitious story that the Temple was taking away the Youth Group room and office and giving it to another group. "A little bit of this, a little bit of that. A desk, a chair, a ditto machine, a typewriter… Dear Youth Group office, little Youth Group room. " So you see my song parody roots grow deep.

TYG was my center. It was a place where I belonged. I had lots of friends and a creative outlet. It is the place that this shy girl came out of her shell.

Then I graduated from high school and went off to college. I headed off to Ohio State. I remember the first day I arrived. I was exploring the dorm and met up with another new student at the TV lounge in the basement. She confided in me that she was afraid that one of her roommates might be Jewish. She was obviously worried about that. Wow. After 17 years of being in the bubble of University Heights, this was my first experience with anti-Semitism. Actually, probably more like naivety and ignorance. And just like that young woman was having her first college eye-opening experience being exposed to a Jew, I was having that same experience of being exposed to a non-Jew. I was growing up. I never told that woman I was Jewish because, well, I just didn't know what to say.

Leaving Cleveland, leaving home, I left a lot of what I thought was not me, including being Jewish. I was 17, and it was the sixties, so it was only certain that I would start to rebel a little. And my rebellion was to reject everything Jewish. For years I was disconnected from anything Jewish. I was trying to find myself in the bigger world, outside the cocoon of where I had grown up. I didn't want to be Jewish. I wanted to be something different, something more me. In my mid-twenties, I got involved in the women's movement and then came out. I got into a committed relationship with a non-Jewish woman. I was experiencing so many new things. One of those things was having my first Christmas tree. It was fun picking out a tree, bringing it home and decorating it, filling the ground underneath with presents. I was like a child on Christmas morning. It was fun. It was the American thing to do. A few years later, when some friends found out I had never been on an Easter egg hunt, they came to my home on Easter morning and hid eggs all over my yard for me to find. I was experiencing those traditional events that most American kids thrill in every year. Somehow it felt kind of right.

After moving to Eugene in 1977, I split with my girlfriend one winter. She had moved out, but still had all of her things in our house. She came by one day and wanted to put up the Christmas decorations that we had put up together every year. I realized that without her in the house, there was no reason to put up these decorations. They weren't really mine. Celebrating Christmas wasn't really something that belonged to me. So I put out my menorah and reclaimed the holiday time, and my home, as mine. As a Jewish home.

Soon after I attended a meeting for Jewish Lesbians that some Eugene women had organized. As lesbians, we didn't feel comfortable in the organized Jewish community. As Jews, we felt like outsiders in the lesbian community. We just wanted a place where we could all feel comfortable being ourselves as Jewish Lesbians. Although we yearned to stay connected to our Jewishness, many of us had rejected organized Jewish religion as being sexist, homophobic and just not relevant to our lives. It was not a place we felt safe. This group of women gathered monthly to celebrate Rosh Chodesh. We got together for Chanukah parties and seders. We called ourselves the *Baleboostehs*, not because any of us fancied ourselves as outstanding homemakers, but because we were a bunch of bossy women. A bond grew among this group of 30 plus women that still lasts to this day. A couple of months ago, we all gathered for the first time in years. Women came from as far as Portland to the gathering. We laughed and shared stories of the past 25 years of *Baleboostehs*. This was a place where we felt we all belonged, a family, a community.

I owe a special gratitude to *Baleboostehs*. It was there that I got to know better a woman I had known through the women's community for a few years. That woman was Sally, who is now my wife, and my best friend for 24 years.

When Sally's mother died, she was searching for a way to handle that transition and discovered the Jewish mourner's path. She started to attend services at TBI every Friday night to say kaddish for her mother. Each week she'd invite me to come along. Occasionally I went, but it didn't speak to me. The music wasn't familiar and at that time the siddur didn't have much transliteration, so it was difficult to follow, so I wasn't much interested. But somehow, near the end of Sally's eleven months of mourning, things started to click a little with me and I started looking forward to attending services. So, after the official mourning period, when Sally no longer felt compelled to attend services to say kaddish, we kept going because we were getting other things out of it.

Beside the wonderful music and learning we were doing, we started to connect with many of the other regular Friday nighters. We were becoming friends, celebrating together, sharing meals, and creating community. After an evening Rosh Hashanah service one year, a group of us wanted to go out for dinner to celebrate a couple of September birthdays. We tried to go to *Turtles*, around the corner from the old TBI, but they were busy and we were a big group and there wasn't room for us. So we crossed the street and went to the Italian restaurant that used to be there. It was all you can eat Tuesday at *Pizza Pete's*, and that is how we became known, informally, as the *All-You-Can-Eat Chavurah*. Many of you here tonight have been a part of the Chavurah. Over the years we've celebrated Chanukah and birthdays together. And there is always food involved. Even our traditional December 25th Chinese food dinner.

When I think about my involvement in TBI, it's really not about spirituality. Although I have found that many of the teachings of progressive Judaism meet with my values, I'm not sure that I would have chosen Judaism as my spirituality if I hadn't been born into it. What I truly value is the community I feel so much a part of. Where else would I go on a Friday night? I just love sitting in this space, being a part of the community. I know that whatever happens, I will be safe in this net of loving arms. Whether it is illness, or death, or a *simcha*, or just an ordinary day, here are the people who will be there with me.

So what does being a Jew mean to me? As I reflect on my life over the past 6 decades, I see that being Jewish has always meant being in community. Every time I really have felt a belonging in my life, it has been through my connection to other Jews. I grew up as part of the center of Jewish life in Cleveland, *Lefton's Delicatessen and Restaurant.* I **found** myself as a member of *Temple Emanu El's Youth Group* in high school. I found myself again as a member of Baleboostehs, where I also found my besheret, Sally. And here at TBI, I have a home and a family. To me, being Jewish has always meant being part of community. When I close my eyes on a Friday night and feel the love and support of those around me, in this room, and throughout my life, I understand what G-d is.