

I left Judaism at age 14. The message was loud and clear at the Reform Temple in Washington, D.C.: women are girlfriends, wives and mothers, not bat mitzvah students, cantors or rabbis. And, certainly, Judaism, in 1959, was not a spiritual home for a budding lesbian.

After that I flirted with Christianity -- or maybe you could say it flirted with me. My first lover's church was warm and inviting. The message was enticing: "Believe in Jesus and all your sins will be forgiven." But try as I might, I just couldn't leave my Jewish self behind.

I moved to the Bay Area in 1983. Five years later, I read about a gay and lesbian synagogue. It seemed inconceivable. I read the article twice. The synagogue was Congregation Sha'ar Zahav. I went to the Rosh Hashanah morning service. It was an amazing experience, full of joy. It was like a Jewish Gay Pride Parade -- but with a few more clothes. We linked arms and I was HOME -- reveling in the fact, that while I wasn't paying attention, Judaism had done a complete turnabout.

About a year after I joined Sha'ar Zahav, I couldn't afford to pay dues. It was before the high holidays and I was really embarrassed. I worried that I wouldn't get High Holiday tickets. I called Lisa Katz; she was on the Dues Committee. (I think she's STILL on the Dues Committee.) She made sure I could go to services and, more importantly, she made me feel welcome. So when I earned more, I paid my dues -- and then gave more.

But I didn't think the shul needed me to get involved. There were lots of smart, talented people at Sha'ar Zahav. Who needed me?

I often say that I joined Sha'ar Zahav to meet a girl. And a few years later, I met Kelly, my spouse of 19 years. It wasn't at CSZ and she wasn't Jewish but it didn't matter. We were married by Rabbi Kahn and attended high holiday services together. She felt as enriched as I did. But we lived in the East Bay during the week and spent weekends at our real house in Napa. Sha'ar Zahav was in the opposite direction.

And so it went for fifteen years...

And then, one day, Rabbi Angel came to visit. We knew her a bit from classes she taught and conversations we had had when my Dad died. She came because she was raising money for the Rainbow fund. During her visit, Kelly mentioned her longing for a deeper spiritual connection. Our Rabbi moved across the room to Kelly, pulled out her appointment calendar and scheduled their first meeting. After three months of discussions with the Rabbi and studying various texts, Kelly decided that she wanted to formally convert to Judaism.

It was during Kelly's "Year of Living Jewishly" that we finally crossed the Bridge on Friday night. The first time we attended services, everything was strange-- especially the Hebrew – and we were too shy to stay for the Oneg. The next time we stayed for the Oneg, but we didn't talk to anyone. Kelly decided this was foolish, that we needed to talk with at least one new person each time. We learned that the folks who give the announcements at services, really ARE interested in talking with you.

We started going to Friday night services on a regular basis and attending more adult education classes. Pretty soon Sha'ar Zahav became part of our family. We met fabulous people and developed close friendships. By participating in the shul, we found the home we wanted; the community where **all the parts of our lives** -- lesbian and Jewish -- thrived in harmony. I started participating in synagogue life as a way of supporting Kelly's conversion process and now... I am studying for my bat mitzvah in March!

I am proud of our Congregation. I have learned so much from the thoughtful, compassionate heart of our Rabbi and the creative, angelic voice of our Cantor. They help make God manifest in my life. I also appreciate the hard working lay leaders of our Congregation who give their time, effort and energy to maintain our religious home.

Now I am more aware of the struggles that our congregation faces: the need for funds to support our clergy and maintain our synagogue; the need for more members to become involved in the life of our shul. It does take all of us, to ensure that Sha'ar Zahav will always be here for each of us. That's why I have increased my giving to Sha'ar Zahav. I hope you will too.

It's easy to make a donation. Just take out your ticket, which also doubles as your pledge card. (PAUSE) Go ahead, take it out. (PAUSE) Now find the amount on the top that feels right to you...and move over

at least one number to the right. Tear a notch there – you don't need a pencil. Then, as you leave, give the ticket to one of the volunteers outside the door.

Dorothy must have been talking about Sha'ar Zahav when she proclaimed those immortal words: "There's no place like home...." You can make Sha'ar Zahav your home by donating more and participating in the life of our community, particularly in our strategic planning process that's just begun.

Kelly and I made the stretch to become more involved and it enriched our lives far beyond our wildest expectations. You can make this happen too!