

How Did I Get Here?

2017 High Holiday Drash by Irene Ogus



My name is Irene Ogus and this is My Story called: How Did I Get Here? May 1970. After a cross-country odyssey in drive-away cars, my friend and I have just arrived in S.F. We are standing at a phone booth near the Pinecrest Coffee Shop at Geary and Mason. It's 9:00 pm. We know nobody and have nowhere to stay. I have \$10 – Terry has \$90.

The Quakers take us in for 2 nights, we then find hotel for a month at 9th and Market - and live on a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter until I get a paycheck for a week's work somewhere. How did I get here?

February 1944 – post-war bombed-out London. I'm born into an orthodox kosher-keeping family consisting of my Yiddish-speaking grandmother, my father, the barber, my mother, the dressmaker and my sister. There's little money to go around, not much food, few books or music and everyone is totally worn down but grateful to be alive. How did I get here and how soon can I get out?

1958 – I'm sitting in the women's balcony of the Ealing & Acton District Synagogue looking down at my father in his tallit – and he appears to be telling a joke to the man next to him. I adore my Dad – his jokes, his dapper suits.

1968 – my Dad died in '66 – my mother fell apart and I flee to New York aboard the SS France. It's July in New York – air conditioners are dripping on me as I wander the humid streets. Let me out of here. Chicago is next.

I take a job I really like. It keeps me in the Windy City for a year. There, I meet a clever, funny, witty, warm woman – Irish-Catholic – one of 10 kids from an alcoholic father and impoverished family. We are so different – and become totally inseparable. We laugh our way across the country for 3 months. We deliver our last vehicle to El Cerrito – it's a huge RV and I'm a nervous wreck on the Bay Bridge. I get a ticket for driving too slowly! We grab a bus and arrive in San Francisco – 9:00 pm – it's May, 1970. Nowhere further West to go.

1979 – For almost 10 years I wander the desert that is SF – searching for someone, anyone – like me – Jewish, lesbian, jock, smart, funny, resourceful, employed. I feel like Sandra Bullock in "Gravity" – floating around in space – wondering if I can find my way home. Search the Classifieds (that's how we did it then). There's a Gay Synagogue here – are you kidding me?

I walk in. I take a deep breath. It's possible I have struck gold. I'm asked to chair an international conference of LGBT Jews; I'm asked to be Treasurer; I'm asked to join the Board. Yes, Yes, Yes – I say – I'll do anything. These are my people. I want to be here!
1983 – I chair the fundraising committee to buy our first Building on Danvers Street. At its inauguration I march down Danvers Street embracing the Torah. Tears streaming, oh my – I am here!

1984 – I'm President. Every day I'm discovering the alchemy of what happens when many heads put their brains and hearts together to create a dynamic and vibrant alternative synagogue.

The Past President's Council is now my favorite group with whom to explore ideas. It's worth having been President so that you can be a member of that august group!

Today I have friends of almost 40 years from Sha'ar Zahav; I have learned to say Kaddish, the Birkat Hamazon, the Channukah songs. I believe I have fulfilled my potential as a Jewish woman, as a leader and as a member of this community.

Sha'ar Zahav has enriched my life; my roots are deep here. SF is my home. Please, – ask yourself how you got here and when asked to join, donate, get involved consider the hundreds, perhaps, thousands whose lives have been enriched by the existence of Sha'ar Zahav.

That is how I got here. Hineni I am here. I will be here to the very end.