

Growing up in Lexington, MA, my best friend was a little girl named Tina who lived just up the street and whose class I was in every year at Fiske Elementary. Tina and I walked to school together each day and shared secrets and favorite books and a burning crush on our fifth grade teacher, Mr. McDonald, and we also shared the winter holidays every year which always makes me think of Tina whenever December rolls around. Each Christmas the Weschler house would swell with ornaments and wreaths and cookies and presents, often carted in by Tina's impossibly chic Italian aunts and uncles, and my brother and I were always invited to join in the festivities. It was at Tina's house that I decorated my first Christmas tree and Easter egg; Tina and her sister, Lauren, in turn tasted their first potato latke and hamantaschen sitting at my parents' kitchen table.

I know that I am not the only one in this community with fond memories of the Christmas season, and there is an added poignancy to the remembrances of some of our members who recall not only Christmas holidays spent with other peoples' families but also Christmas holidays spent with families of their very own. Beth Hillel Congregation Bnai Emunah is proud to have amongst our ranks many Jews by choice and also many supportive non-Jewish spouses, individuals who have made the admirable decision to raise their children as Jews even as they themselves come from different faith traditions. At this time of year in particular, we recognize the enormous force of that generosity.

As we all well know, bringing up Jewish children in our modern world is a commitment in every sense of the word, requiring great resources of time, energy, and money and casting one's lot not only with a religion but also with a nation and a people. I have said before that in certain ways we are all "Jews by choice"; given the many pressures and competing alternatives pulling us away from Jewish engagement, to live a rich Jewish life is by no means the only possible path, even for parents born into the Jewish tradition let alone for those whose connection to Judaism may come simply from falling in love with a Jewish man or woman. Supportive non-Jewish spouses give an enormous gift to their partners and also to us, participating in the life of our community and helping to ensure Jewish continuity at a time when it is so desperately needed. We are grateful for their contributions to synagogue life and especially grateful for that of their children.

In honor of the Jews by choice and supportive non-Jewish spouses in our congregational family, many of whom grew up celebrating December 25 as a very special day, I share this morning a blessing written by Rabbi Janet Marder, spiritual leader of Congregation Beth Am in Los Altos, CA:

You are the moms and dads who drive the Hebrew school carpool and bring the refreshments to Shabbaton. You help explain to your kids why it's important to get up on Sunday morning and to learn to be a Jew. You take classes and read Jewish books to deepen your own understanding, so you can help to make a Jewish home. You learn to make Kugel and latkes; you try to like gefilte fish; you learn to put on a Seder; you learn to put up a Sukkah. You join your spouse at the Shabbat table – maybe you even set that Shabbat table and make it beautiful.

You come to services, even when it feels strange and confusing at first. You hum along to those Hebrew songs, and some of you even learn to read that difficult language. You stand on the bima and pass the Torah to your children on the day of their bar or bat mitzvah, and tell them how proud you are and how much you love them, and how glad you are to see them grow into young Jewish men and women.

We know that some of you have paid a significant price for the generous decision you made to raise Jewish children. You have made a painful sacrifice, giving up the joy of sharing your own spiritual beliefs and passing your own religious traditions down to your kids. I hope your children and your spouse tell you often how wonderful you are, and that their love and gratitude, and our love and gratitude, will be some compensation, and will bring you joy....

*May God bless you; may God keep you;
May the light of the Holy One shine on you;
And may God grant you the precious gift of peace. Amen.*

Thank you for all that you do for your families and for us!

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Annie Tucker