

I have been strongly encouraged to speak on this occasion.

Tonight marks the end of almost a year long journey to become a “Jew by choice”, but in this year, decades of memories and thoughts that never really connected into a smooth line came together with a clarity that at times was overwhelming. It was almost as if I was being rewarded for all the years I kept the questions alive. So while at times it seems like it was only yesterday that I first walked into the Temple and met with Rabbi Mackler, I’ve had days that my entire life has replayed in slow motion.

The official part of this process has been through a six month schedule of “Conversion Conversations” or as Rabbi Schiffan has often described, Rabbi Mackler’s Boot Camp”. The unofficial part for me has been my attempt to infuse myself into a full year cycle of Jewish life including attending Shabbat Services almost every Friday and Chevrah Torah, on almost every Saturday morning. I even have the beginning of a decent Jewish library...one that Rabbi Mackler would approve of. I know officially the term is “conversion”, but I’m not really coming from any formal religious practice...I have termed it more as an arrival.

This term “Jew by Choice” has been intriguing and I seem to be drawn back to this phrase daily. In Torah study, Rabbi Schiffan has asked, on occasion, if we are sure we want to be a part of this; this has been asked following a discussion that has centered on both past and future struggles of the Jewish people. Though the question may have served as some comic relief, I have not wavered in my response to myself, a definitive YES! But it is around the word, CHOICE, that I would like to elaborate a little further.

At some point...and I can't remember exactly when it hit me, I felt I really didn't have a choice. You see...I believe I've been on a collision course with tonight for my entire life.

Many of you know that my sister, who is here tonight, and I, grew up with a Jewish father and Christian mother. Though some of the details have been hard to come by, we know that our father and one his brothers managed to get out of Lengerich, Germany in 1939 and wound up like so many in NYC. Over the next few years we know that our father's parents, Abraham and Frauke, along with three other siblings, became victims of that senseless hatred and perished in the Rigga Ghetto. In what could only be described as almost stranger than fiction, our father enlisted in the American Army and actually fought through that bitter winter in the Battle of the Bulge. As part of an intelligence unit, he actually had the chance to accompany a rifle squadron in the liberation of his own hometown; he even came face to face with some young men he had attended school with a few years earlier. He returned to NYC following the war and was later transferred to Asheville NC, where he met our mom.

While I don't remember our father ever going to Temple Services, I know now, especially with a little education, that how he lived each day, from being slow to anger, not engaging in gossip, and seeking quiet reflection on Saturdays that he indeed was engaged in the beautiful practices of this faith. His words may have been few, unless he was he felt inclined to speak out on some form of injustice, but his actions spoke to the belief that redemption is how one lives their life on this earth. Each time that I heard these aforementioned traits this year I saw both my father and felt something deep inside of me come to life that had lain dormant for so long. I also know

that our mom could cook both matzah ball soup and southern fried chicken with equal expertise.

Somewhere between the connection I felt to my father, the peace I have found on Shabbat, the better life I have experienced through the study of Torah, the joy I've felt by being included in family traditions in the homes of the Smalls and the Marks, and finally the welcoming spirit of the entire Temple family I BELIEVE THIS WAS NOT A CHOICE...IT WAS INSTEAD A REAWAKENING OF my JEWISH SOUL.

This reawakening just happened to evolve over my entire working life as a YMCA professional (37 years) and while that fact has produced several pauses in conversations, I think things happened just as they were meant to. Throughout the 37 years in 4 distinctly different geographic zones, I've managed to speak openly about my questions around my search for faith. Many within the YMCA organization, but outside of the Middle TN Y, would have said I might want to consider becoming a Jew in another Y in another part of the country. They would be wrong, I have no regrets. I heard several stories during the course of our Conversion Conversation classes of some that have experienced intolerance and actual harassment from their supervisors and peers in their workplace. I have, not only, never experienced that here, but have had unconditional support the entire way. Serving others, and meeting people where they are in life, should be universal and transcend any religious boundaries. I want to thank all the staff here tonight, I'm honored that you are here to share this special moment with me. In fact, I want to thank all of the new Temple friends I have made this year for not only being here, but for the continual support throughout the entire year.

If this past year hasn't already been eventful enough I have one final itch to scratch and that is to travel to Lengerich, Germany this year for the purpose of constructing some image in my mind of my father's and his family's life before history changed it forever.

Now it is time for me to pursue and except the life that I believe was meant for me.

Thank You.