ELUL STORIES
Sharing our stories, sharing lives, creating community

Elul is the month leading up to Rosh HaShanah. Each day during the month, a different Temple Beth Torah congregant will share an Ethical Will or portion of one in order to help us prepare for this season of self reflection and personal growth.

The Sephardic Gift
Renee Pardo

The "gift" I would like to leave my two boys is appreciation for the differences in their own Jewish identity. 50 percent Ashkenazi and 50 percent Sephardim, I am the Sephardic half and when I grew up being Sephardic was always a burden or something extra that had to be explained. The word "Sephardic" has come to mean, unfortunately, different things depending on which Jewish history "expert" one listens to. I grew up in a family of Judeo-Spanish origin. We spoke Ladino and we are not the same Jews from Islamic countries whose vernacular language is Arabic or Aramaic or Persian. The cultures are different, the foods, the traditions and in fact there are very few similarities to the Arab Jews. The Sephardim are Jews originating from Spain (Sepharad) who lived in various parts of Turkey, Greece, Italy, Egypt and North Africa. They form a category by themselves and exhibit marked differences from other "Oriental groups" whose ancestors never set foot upon the soil of Spain. This culture may very well be all but vanished by the time I am gone but I hope to pass along to my children some customs, some language, some foods and some love of their Sephardim roots.

Let me go back a few years to my high school days. My father, a holocaust survivor was not keen on letting me or my sister tell anyone that we were Jewish. Finally after a couple of years of me attending clandestine BBYO meetings I was ready to make a leap and miss school for Jewish holidays. My best friend, Elise Cohen, who was my co-conspirator in all things Jewish backed me up: "Renee, stand up to your father, she said; this is America, take the day off, go with me to synagogue." My father relented and when I returned to school the next day my teacher asked why I was absent. I said because it was a Jewish holiday. She laughed out loud. "With YOUR name, how can you
say you are Jewish?" There I was at the ripe old age of thirteen, standing in a classroom in Houston, Texas in 1982 explaining about the Spanish Inquisition, the Expulsion, and the fact that my father was born in Greece and my mother from Brooklyn by way of Turkey. I even drew her a map on the blackboard. My poor teacher who had only recently finished her student teaching year, not to mention her year as a Dallas Cowboy Cheerleader, didn't know what to say and told me to just go sit down. To her, if you were a Jew your name was Cohen, Grossman, Berman, Bernstein, it was NOT Pardo.

I know I will never be able to convey to my boys the beauty and wisdom of the Ladino language. I will not be able to convey personal experiences of my father, Mother and relatives speaking Ladino at home interspersed with Turkish, Hebrew, French, Greek, Italian and believe it or not, English. It was amazing to me how easily they could switch between the languages. I try, making my boys laugh when I tell them it's "skuro" outside (meaning dark) or "booz" very cold. I tell them stories of my father's adventures with learning English and his frustration with the "silent e". Twice a year I make borekas, and we roll out phyllo-type dough and stuff them with a delicious mixture of cheeses and spinach. With the left over dough we make "biscochos" or hard cookies with sesame seeds and I try to channel my mother and her "pacensia" or patience as I let them try to do each cookie individually even though I could do it myself and finish in half the time. I tell them the stories of their Aunts and Uncles who did not make it out of Greece and Turkey because they were sent to the camps and the stories of the brave ones that did. I tell them about how they came to the garment district in New York and how they had to get jobs and that even among other Jews there was much discrimination. I guess I didn't realize how much my Sephardic heritage was a gift when I was younger, in my youth it was something that made me different and something that had to be explained. It is my will to pass along the richness and specialness of half of my children's heritage to them, in memory of my parents and all those who came before them but also as a gift for the future.

Renee Pardo is a new board member at Temple Beth Torah. She recently chaired HELP Suffolk day. Renee and her husband Aleck Martuge are involved at TBT as are her sons Aaron and Max.

Would you like to share your Elul Story? Write an ethical will, in the form of a letter, a story or a collections of sayings. Include the "gifts" you would like to leave to your family focusing on the values and character traits which you feel are most important. Send it in its entirety or send a section of it to: ravsusie@gmail.com.
If you missed any of the previous Elul Stories you can go to www.tbttny.org (media galleries/elul stories).