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 respond to the prompt:

This Inspired Me...

The Joy of Hebrew

Jiya Kowarsky

I've had a love affair with the Hebrew Language for a long time now, specifically from the age of eight when I began traipsing to Hebrew School every Thursday afternoon. I grew up in Pittsburgh and we belonged to a Reform Temple.

Having just completed the excellent new book by Lewis Glinert, entitled THE STORY OF HEBREW, I realize that I am not alone. Jews have felt this way for thousands of years.

I have to credit my initial Hebrew teachers for my love of the language. They were young Israelis who had come to study at The University of Pittsburgh; teaching us Hebrew was their side gig. I remember Miss Eichenbaum, my first Hebrew teacher, with her honey-colored curly hair. She played the guitar and taught us an ancient melody: "Miserlou" with the added words, "Yach, Yach, Chabibi". Chabibi means my darling or my beloved. This melody had an Arabic twang which transported me back to a place that I could somehow recall, as though from a past life. In addition to singing, we received a Hebrew notebook with a thin line followed by a thick line, unusual spacing, so as to learn to write each letter in Hebrew script. This also fascinated me.

My second memorable Hebrew Teacher was Mrs Gillerntern - a Holocaust survivor - very strict with us; we dared not misbehave. She had a glamorous look, I thought, for a Holocaust survivor, with black hair and red lipstick. But as
I say, we dared not misbehave. Mrs. Gillertern had a stop watch and we had weekly contests to see who could read the most Hebrew nonsense syllables within a given time - such as "ba, beh, be, bo, boo," all with the letter BET. I practiced fervently for these contests in hope of winning the trophy presented at the next assembly held in our small chapel.

These teachers whom we loved and feared must have been like the ones mentioned by Glinert in his fine book - they were like the traditional "Heder" teachers who taught children the Alef-Bet in one room schoolhouses, throughout the diaspora, anywhere from Poland to Yemen.

When I went to Israel as an exchange student, at the age of sixteen, I was inspired by another Hebrew teacher, Mr. Shoham, a Sephardic Jew, who spoke with deep guttural tones, pronouncing his Eiyens and Chets so beautifully. Mr. Shoham's job was to get us ready during the two summer months for the new school year. He would assign us an essay each week. I remember him correcting my written errors; each mistaken word, each awkward phrase. His corrections were so clear and precise that I felt loved and cared for even though far from home.

I understand that in learning Hebrew, I am part of a chain that goes way back - As Glinert says, it goes back to the Garden of Eden where God, Adam and Eve chatted and then argued about the forbidden fruit.

Jiya Kowarsky is an avid reader. She recently joined the Temple on our trip to Israel where she was able to use her Hebrew skills regularly. She spent time this summer volunteering at the Wyandanch Summer Camp where she taught storytelling.

Would you like to share your Elul Story for our This Inspired Me series? Please share a book, or a movie, or a song, or a TV show that left a lasting impression on you. Send your This Inspired Me to: ravsusie@gmail.com. (This theme is inspired by the fact that this month we are holding a Book Drive for the Brooke Jackman Literacy Foundation. We are collecting new children and teen books which will be delivered to children all over the NY area. Come hear the Jackman’s story on Friday, Sept 8th after services.)

If you missed any of the previous Elul Stories you can go to www.tbtny.org (media galleries/elul stories).