A Great Teacher
Dr. Debra Brooks

When I was a freshman at the University of Texas at Austin, I landed in their Plan II college, a small program of 500 students within the vast university of 50,000. I was required to take certain humanities courses for my degree, chosen from a short list of options, all of which had hand picked professors, and as a result, I had access to some of the best academic teachers. One of the those professors was Dr. Jack Zammito, who was a huge inspiration for me.

Growing up in my home, mathematics and hard science were seen as the priorities of education, and anything else was, well, wimpy, and irrelevant. I had always found history to be tiresome and tedious, just so many dates and names on a timeline to be remembered, and it did nothing for me.

Jack Zammito changed all that. I chose to take his Intellectual History classes because I needed 6 history credits, and as a closet philosopher/mystic, I thought that the History of Ideas might be somewhat less wearisome. Indeed, I found it fascinating and life changing.

His two semesters spanned the Greeks to the Modern Era, and clearly described how man's search for Understanding, and later for Meaning and Morality, brought us on an amazing journey. He tied the thinkers of the times with the events of the times, and we explored how the authoritarianism of the
Church, through its many morphings, influenced and was influenced by the major thinkers of the day. How discovering that the world wasn't flat, or that the sun did not revolve around the earth, the discovery of coal and the manufacture of iron, and later the ability to fly, altered the ways we think about our lives; how dictators and great wars gave birth to new ways of seeing our reality. He laid out the evolution of Thinking as both reacting to and acting upon the world we live in, and showed me how religion led to philosophy and philosophy led to science. And now science, at our best, is giving us antimatter, String Theory, and stem cell cloning, things that some call "godly". So we are coming full circle- from a certain point of view.

Jack inspired me by giving me a sense of being part of History, now, in the making. He also gave me a glimpse into completely other ways of being. To realize that what I understand to be "true" is merely the accepted truths of this era I live in, or the neighborhood I grew up in, or my particular culture, and that what is unconsciously true for me may be legitimately quite false for someone else. Nothing exists in a vacuum. It has made me a very tolerant and more forgiving person, and it has given me the ability to look at disturbing events going on around me, and see that they are fleetingly temporary in the grand scheme of Time (which is something I find particularly comforting during this past year.)

Once you see a thing, you can not un-see it.

Debra Brooks has been a member of TBT since 2013, is on the Board of Trustees, and actively involved in our Touched by Torah project. She practices medicine at Northwell's GoHealth Urgent Care, and her son, Daniel Leisman, is a third year medical student at Mount Sinai. She would like to become better versed in Jewish learning and Kabbalah.

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).