

When Alex asked me to say a few words about my mother during today's service, I was honored, of course, on my family's behalf, and yet I couldn't help but think that the idea was a little unusual.

My mother – whom most of you knew, and whom many of you knew very well, and even intimately, over the past thirty years – was one woman. It's true that Temple B'Nai Abraham became an extension of her life, and that this synagogue – and the Jewish community – were as central to her identity as was being a mother, a daughter, a wife, and a social worker.

But at the end of the day, she was one person. So why single her out for any special praise, or commemoration?

Of course, I'm her son, and I'm inclined to think she was special, and of course, I'm setting up a rhetorical straw man here – I'm really about to tell you why she was, in fact, so special, and deserving of special mention.

But I think it's still worth noting that my mother was one of hundreds of men and women who helped build this synagogue, which you will be rededicating just a few weeks from now. Her name will join many others on the commemorative plaques that adorn the walls, the inside covers of the prayer books, the table clothes, the Torah cases, and the pews. This community was built by Elaine Zeitz, but it was also built by countless others, with names like Nissim, Groveman, Trackman, Rosenberg, Bush, Goldman, Lutz, Dowshen, Morgenstin, and Reichlen.

They shuttled their kids to and from Hebrew school. Dutifully prepared Oneg Shabbat. Sat on committees. Built the sukkahs. Raised the funds. Held break-the-fast dinners and yard sales. Celebrated each other's marriages and mourned each other's passing. They did all of these things

together. My mother was a pillar of the community, but this house stands on many pillars.

For my mother, Rosh Hashanah was perhaps the most joyous day of the year. It was a time for family and friends.

Each Rosh Hashanah, we woke up a little later than usual -- not having to worry about meeting the 9am school bell at Clara Barton, or catching the 6:45 am bus to Bordentown Regional. Mom made us breakfast, left us to our own resources to get dressed, and met us downstairs at about 10am. Together, we walked to synagogue, where my mother would proceed to spend the next three hours alternating between studied interest in the formal religious procedures, and whispered conversations with all of her friends.

There's an old Jewish joke that goes something like this. A young boy asks his father, "Dad, why does Mr. Cohen go to synagogue every week?" To which the father replies, "Mr. Cohen goes to synagogue every week to speak with God." The boy takes in this information for a few minutes, and then asks, "Dad, why do we go to synagogue every week." To which the father replies, "To speak with Mr. Cohen."

That's not entirely inapplicable to my mother. She came here to see you. She came here to be near you, and to share the sweetness of the high holidays with you. My mother couldn't read Hebrew, but the tunes and cadences of the Torah service were embedded deep in her memory. She knew how the sanctuary felt in the presence of 100 people. She knew how it smelled on the high holidays, with the blend of women's perfume and freshly scrubbed children. She knew how the light hits the stained glass windows at 11am, and how the shofar sounded. She came here to be with you, and to feel these things with you.

Historians of the African American experience like to say that black Americans living under Jim Crow made “congregation out of segregation” – that is, they used their forced isolation to their advantage, and built powerful bonds of community and kinship. I think Jews did much the same thing over two thousand years of diaspora. But in twentieth-century America, we were accepted. We integrated. We didn’t need to turn segregation into congregation, because we were no longer so strictly segregated.

But we built congregations like this nonetheless. My mother gave her life to this congregation, because it was, for her, a core part of her ethical being, and an extension of her family.

In a more literal sense, though, Rosh Hashanah was all about family, for my mother. She’d return home at about 1 o’clock in the afternoon, perfectly dressed and made up, put on an old, tattered apron, and spend the next seven hours in my family’s old, tattered – but surprisingly functional – kitchen, cooking brisket, and chicken soup, and kugle, and honey cake, and carrots, and string beans. She cooked for her kids, for her husband, for her mother and father, for her brother and sister-in-law, for her nephews, for her friends. This dinner was the most important dinner of the year for my mother. She had it down to a science. She reveled in it. Far from causing her distress or anxiety, it gave her immeasurable joy. The family was coming home.

Many of you know that I’m an historian, and so I hope you’ll forgive my using history to make my point. There’s an historian named Andrew Heinze, who has written about the role of material things in Jewish life. Heinze explains that in the old country, where most Jews lived a life of tremendous scarcity and poverty, material fineries helped demarcate the holy and the mundane. People who wore the same pair of ragged clothes all week, and ate meatless dinners each night, and used perhaps a single set of cutlery, would take

one day out of the week and make it different. On Shabbat, there was a white table cloth. There was a rich dinner of meat and vegetables. There was the one good suit or good dress. There was real, silver or pewter cutlery. There was a kiddish cup. These things helped Jews mark Shabbat out as a holy temporal space – something apart from the mundane doings of the rest of the week.

In America, Heinze believes, Jews inverted this equation. In a world of such tremendous abundance, eating a good meal off of good plates and wearing a nice dress no longer made the day especially different. Because American Jews were able to do these things every day. So instead of fine material items helping to mark the holy out from the mundane, holy days became occasions on which to purchase, use and display ones fineries.

I think Andrew Heinze is a pretty good historian, but his scheme just doesn't apply to my mother. If you've ever seen my parents' house, you know that it was a whirlwind of chaos and paper when I was growing up. You know that we didn't stand on ceremony – that my mother was compulsively busy and didn't care too much how the dining room looked on any given day, or how the kitchen looked, or what kind of plates we ate off of. But on Rosh Hashanah, all was order, and beauty. She brought out her grandmother's china; the silver candle sticks; the beautiful, crystal serving dishes; the silk table cloth; the challah plate that Rabbi Samuel Belkin gave to her and my father on their wedding day. She did these things because, for her, Rosh Hashanah was, truly, a holy time – a time for family, and congregation, and community – a time for reflection, and for new beginnings. It had to look different, it had to feel different, because it was different.

Yesterday, as my father and I chopped onions and garlic so as to recreate my mother's brisket, I thought about these things. About 31 Rosh Hashanah dinners spent with her,

about growing up in this synagogue, about how dearly she regarded all of you, and about how important this day was to her.

On behalf of Nate, and my father, and my grandmother, I want to wish you a Shana Tova. And in memory of my mother, a sweet and happy New Year.