

OUR COMMUNITY, OUR HOME | Juju Chang

When I first fell in love with my husband, I remember telling him matter-of-factly, preemptively, forcefully, and repeatedly, “I’m never going to convert. I take my secular humanism very seriously, next subject.” I knew how much his Jewishness buoyed him, but he never pushed. We did, however, have clear-eyed talks about raising our hypothetical kids to someday embrace their Judaism along with their Korean heritage.

Never one to rush into anything, it took Neal seven years to ask me to marry him. His childhood rabbi came out of retirement to officiate. We were DINKS (double income, no kids) for five more years. Then we moved to West 90th Street and were overjoyed to learn that one of us got pregnant. One day, seemingly out of the blue, I turned to Neal and said over my big belly, “I think I want to explore becoming a Jew.” In the movie version, I think Neal would do a spit take.

We had been to High Holiday Services at a different Upper West Side shul, but it just didn’t click. Organizations, no matter the size, are animated by people. For me, Rodeph Sholom became home to us because of a series of people.

I was a reporter at ABC News, Neal was executive producer of Dateline NBC. We were busy journalists who discussed everything under the sun. And yet, once a week, we began walking those seven blocks to and from Rodeph Sholom and we began to talk about things we’d never discussed during more than a decade as a couple. Do you believe in God? Afterlife? What is the meaning in life? In the rabbis and rabbinic interns, we found teachers, confidantes and friends. We still keep in touch with those who have moved on. In Rabbi Levine, we have found someone we both respect and laugh with. He gives a thoughtful sermon, then jokes about the Yankees. He cites Talmudic scholarship as easily as he gives parenting advice.

But it’s been through life’s milestones and rituals that Rodeph Sholom has cemented our sense of belonging. We now have three sons whose *britot milah* were with our rabbis. Our home was full of people entranced by the magnitude of the moment.

When Neal’s mother, Mildred, passed away, we were pulling up to the Memorial Service at my in-laws’ congregation, when we saw two people we didn’t recognize right away. As we got closer we realized it was two of our clergy. We were so moved by their unannounced and unexpected act of caring – that they had come to pray with us in a show of support. It was a mitzvah I will never forget.

Our children are no longer hypothetical. Jared is 8, Travis is 5, and Mason is 1. I can’t begin to count the number of friendships we’ve made with other parents whose kids attend Pre-School, Summer Camp, Learning Together, and Religious School at Rodeph Sholom. Tot Shabbat has been a special family favorite for years. The warmth of the Rodeph Sholom School, Camp, and Religious School is embodied by caring people, congregants and professional staff alike.

Over the years, we've become more involved through Adult Education, lay leadership committees, and Mitzvah Days. One year, as a family, we cleaned a Central Park playground five blocks from our home. Last year, Neal took the boys to plant a garden at a senior center. I take pride in the many service projects we at Rodeph Sholom organize, even if the only contribution I've made is a small check for Solar Cookers or Mosquito Nets.

Community is an overused word in today's parlance, but Rodeph Sholom has become our community. Our family feels very much at home here, thanks to the ties that bind anyone to a place like Rodeph Sholom: *the people*. And our children have embraced their heritage in a nurturing place. They are fond of saying, "we're half-Asian and 100% Jewish!"