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In the path of her fathers

For Orenstein, a 'sweet year' starts with bittersweet memories

Joanne Palmer | High Holidays |

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Three generations of Orensteins; Rabbi Jehiel and Sylvia are in the center.

The High Holy Days are about time.

They're about change and renewal, repentance and forgiveness, and self-knowledge.

They mark the time in the year when circles and straight lines intersect; when the circle that is made by the seasons, and the forward motion that comes from human history and human lives meet.

They are a time when we think about our past, even as we look toward the future.

For Rabbi Debra Orenstein of Congregation B'nai Israel in Emerson, this holiday season will be a particular challenge, as her past and present shift around her.

The daughter, granddaughter, and great-granddaughter of rabbis, this year, for the first time, she will lead Yizkor on Yom Kippur as she thinks about her own father, Rabbi Jehiel Orenstein of West Orange, who died in May.

Debra Orenstein has been weaving the tradition in which she was firmly planted with the change that she feels fealty to tradition demands ever since she can remember.

Her roots go back to the great Polish yeshivah at Volozhin, where her great-grandfather, Rabbi Shlomo Polachek, studied; he went on to head other great yeshivot. In the early 1920s, he came to America to be rosh yeshivah at the Rabbi Isacc Elchanan Theological Seminary, Yeshiva University's rabbinical school. His passage to this country was eventful; even before it could get underway, "there had to be a special act of Congress to let him into the country," Orenstein said.

Polachek was known as an illui — a prodigy. His great work, written when he still was young, was the Chidushei Ha'llui.

On his way to the ship that would carry him across the Atlantic, Polachek and his family could be seen carrying a bundle; they

seemed to protect it more than any of their other belongings, Orenstein said. Logically assuming that the bundle contained valuables, thieves stole it; when they realized that it held just a manuscript, the thieves, in a fit of pique, burned it.

It was Polachek's life work. He fell into a deep depression.

His disciples put together their notes and recreated the work.

Polachek died relatively young, of an abscessed tooth, the year before penicillin was invented, Orenstein said.

Polachek's daughter, Libby, married another rabbi, Samuel Mowshowitz, who was the chief rabbi at the yeshiva at Hartford, Conn. Their son, Dr. Israel Mowshowitz, was another towering figure in modern Jewish life. He was the rabbi of the Hillcrest Jewish Center in Queens; at the time, with its 2,700 families, the largest synagogue in the country. It also was the prototypical "shul with a pool," the early 20th century synagogue model proposed by such rabbinic luminaries of the era as Mordecai Kaplan.

Mowshowitz embodied many of the new developments in Jewish life. A close friend of then New York Gov. Mario Cuomo — the governor referred to him as "my rabbi" — Mowshowitz was a founder of the New York Board of Rabbis, a founder of the International Synagogue at JFK Airport, was among the first rabbis in the United States to focus on the plight of Soviet Jewry (he visited there in the 1950s), and was very active in the civil rights movement. At a point in history when the Orthodox and Conservative worlds still had porous boundaries and were open to each other, he was the Orthodox-trained and Orthopractic leader of a Conservative shul.

Jehiel Orenstein, a Conservative rabbi, married Mowshowitz's daughter, Sylvia. After a stint as an Air Force chaplain and stays at congregations on Long Island, he and his family moved to South Orange, where he was the rabbi of Congregation Beth El for more than three decades.

His daughter Debra, born in the mid 1960s, grew up "very much in the Conservative movement," she said; she went to Solomon Schechter elementary and high schools, and she went to Camp Ramah in the Berkshires.

"It was a wonderful family to grow up in," she said. She knew all along that she was interested "in having a life in the Jewish community," she said, although then she knew that the rabbinate was closed to her. Still, she yearned.

"Gerson Cohen" — that was Dr. Gerson Cohen, then chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, the academic center of Conservative Judaism — "was at my bat mitzvah. I don't remember this, but I was told that my d'var Torah was about my becoming a rabbi.

"He came up to me afterward and said, 'it's not going to happen in my lifetime, and probably not in your lifetime.'

"Six years later, I was in rabbinical school." And Cohen was able to ordain the first Conservative woman rabbi, soon before he died.

At first, her father's shul was not egalitarian. Women were not counted in the minyan, they could not represent the congregation in prayer, and they could not read the Torah during services.

She remembers the watershed moment when her father realized that change was necessary.

"My sister and I used to lead junior congregation," Orenstein said. She was 11 and her sister was 14; they taught younger children how to read Torah. They had lobbied for change, but it did not take. But "There was a girl there, who was about 8," she recalled. "We taught her to read Torah, and somehow she hadn't realized that she would be ineligible to read in the big congregation.

"Once she realized that, she wasn't only disappointed. She was irate. She said to my dad, 'Why am I doing this if I can only do it until I am 12?'

"That conversation hit him in a way that the issue hadn't hit him before. He loved that kids in his shul were learning to read Torah from age 8, and somehow that juxtaposition, and the way the question was asked, with such innocence — somehow that led him to rethink."

Once Jehiel Orenstein decided to make that change, in the mid 1970s, he did it thoughtfully and gradually, his daughter said, instituting it by adopting a process with which the entire community could engage.

Orenstein went to Princeton — "I wanted to meet a few non-Jews, learn how the other nine-tenths live," she said. She majored in history and loved the education, but confronted, for the first time, the ingrained anti-Semitism that lurks in corners of the old-money old-name world. It manifested itself as a refusal to allow her to specialize in Jewish history because, as she was assured, "there is no such thing as Jewish history." Why? Because "there is no geographic consistency," she was told.

"It was a good experience overall," she said. "It showed me the underbelly. The Ivy League is so beautiful is so many ways, but there is an underbelly to it."

After college, Orenstein went to JTS to work toward a doctorate in Jewish history, but as soon as the decision to ordain women was made she applied and was accepted into the first class of women. Because she made the decision to take a semester off every two she completed, she graduated in 1990.

Next, she went to Los Angeles, where she studied and taught at the University of Judaism, and then became the rabbi of

Makom Ohr Shalom, a “Jewish renewal congregation that focused on meditation and spirituality,” she said. “Those things were always dear to me. So I found a community in which no amount of experimentation was too much. I brought tradition in a way that they weren’t used to, and it really pushed me to innovate, and to see how many different forms liturgy and ritual can take, and still be loyal to the tradition.”

The synagogue’s High Holy Days rabbi was Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, the Renewal movement’s inspirational powerhouse. The two worked together for 15 years. “It was a privilege to conduct services with him,” Orenstein said.

Three years ago, with the financial meltdown of 2008 pushing them from the west coast and her father’s illness pulling at them from the east, Orenstein, her husband, filmmaker Craig Weisz, and their two young children, Emmett and Hannah Mathilda, moved back to New Jersey.

Jehiel Orenstein suffered from a particularly cruel disease, ALS, better known as Lou Gehrig’s disease. He and Sylvia stayed with their daughter for each of the last three High Holy Days, and she and the congregation watched him decline, and watched the courage with which he faced the horror.

“Rapid decline is characteristic of ALS, and I have seen my father come in each year in a very different state,” Debra Orenstein said.

“Our positions were reversed” — she was on the bimah, he was in the congregation — “and normally that would have been a happy thing for both of us, but his being so ill made it difficult.

“The first time my dad used a wheelchair was at my installation.”

He spoke there, “and because he was sitting at the pulpit, he asked for a little stand for his notes. He spoke for about 20 minutes. He spoke beautifully. It was a gorgeous, highly organized talk, about the meaning of three words — Congregation; B’nai; Israel.

“And at the end, he went down the ramp on his wheelchair, and I went to collect his notes. I saw that he had written down only three words — Zalman, Schachter, Shalomi. He wanted to be sure that he had those names in the right order.

“My dad was losing all sorts of abilities, but his mind was so sharp that he didn’t need a single note to speak.

“The last time he was at the synagogue, it was last Yom Kippur. He couldn’t talk at all any more. He looked like an empty shell of a person.

“But he wasn’t.

“He was still very active and engaged, but you couldn’t tell that from his facial expression. The only way he could comment was by blinking his eyes. It meant a great deal to me that the congregation greeted him as himself. They didn’t treat him as though he was missing.”

She always tries to center her sermons around one point that would be memorable for her congregation, Orenstein said. Last year, it was to be about free will, illustrated by how easy it would have been for her to stop at a highway rest stop and do something she never has done in her life — knowingly eat treif. It was going to be about choice.

“My dad was the example,” she said. “He didn’t have a choice about a lot, but within the confines of what he had to choose from, he made the decision to stay in his own house, to stay engaged, to stay alive as long as possible, to attend services, although it was difficult physically and emotionally.

“I talked about him, with him sitting there, and people seeing that tremendous decline.

“He and my mother made the decision years before he was sick that they would do whatever it took to celebrate a simchah. Too many people show up for funerals, but not for weddings and bar mitzvahs and happy times. So his coming for High Holy Days services represented that.

“My father did all the preaching that year, even though he didn’t say a word.”