

Remarks by Sharon Oberst DeFala – 75th Anniversary Shabbat Moring Service

I am a child of Beth El.

In 1970, when it was time for me to begin Kindergarten, my parents, recently arrived from Philadelphia, enrolled me in the Beth El Sunday school program with Molly Weiner as my teacher. They chose Beth El at that time because they wanted to belong to a conservative synagogue, so my brother David and I would have a sense of community and a sense of Judaism.

I sang with my classmates every Sunday morning as we put our pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters into the *tzedakah* box. I learned about the holidays. I thought everyone was Jewish.

Over the years, we stayed here, as a family, when the young progressive rabbi Jonas Goldberg was hired, when the congregation voted to become egalitarian, and when we hired Cantor Deborah Katchko-Zimmerman, the second female cantor to take a pulpit in Conservative Judaism.

I learned to bake challah next door at rebitzin Chelly Goldberg's house. I carried the Torah up this aisle at my bat mitzvah ceremony. I read a speech about threats to Jewish population growth from this pulpit during my confirmation. I thought everyone believed in equality.

As I left Norwalk and began traveling, I brought my Beth El background with me. I sought out Jewish communities and Jewish landmarks throughout Europe and the Caribbean, and wherever I attended school. I would come back to visit between adventures and return to Beth El, sometimes as a substitute teacher in the Hebrew school, or to help with youth group events. I thought that everyone must have a spiritual home to which they return every chance they get.

And, eventually, I grew up and got married, despite all the odds-makers. My husband and I wanted to belong to a synagogue where we could each feel at home, a place where our some-day children would have a sense of community, and a sense of Judaism. President Barbara Hennes recruited me to join the board of trustees; and we stayed when the congregation voted to hire our young energetic rabbi Ron Fish.

Jennifer Atlas, Deborah Gordon, Michelle Rich, Stacey Schub and I returned to this bimah, where we all first met in elementary school, on the 30th anniversary of our bat mitzvahs, and read from the torah again, reuniting with each other and with our own spirits in new ways and old. I know, given the chance, everyone would want to re-live her bat mitzvah.

Now, our son is in kindergarten, after 3 years as a Nitzan student, and our daughter is in her second year at Nitzan with our innovative leader Beverly Stein. They sing the songs, and they learn about the holidays. They lead us in the blessings at home every Friday night, and tell us about the friends they have made at Beth El. And I know how lucky they are to be children of Beth El.