



**JOYCE LOVINGER**

**Let's talk about your background, and what brought you to this shul.**

My parents were both Jewish, but it was a very assimilated household. They didn't ever belong to a synagogue. The first time I remember being in a synagogue was my first cousin's Bar Mitzvah, when I was six years old. It was an Orthodox shul in Detroit, and the women sat upstairs. That's my first memory of anything religious as such. My parents did Hanukkah and they did

Passover, and they kept me out of school for High Holidays, but there was nothing behind why I was being kept home from school.

When I was in college, I was dating a non-Jewish guy who worked in a library, and I was the first Jewish girl he ever dated. He started reading books about the Jewish religion, and I had to read books to give him answers to the questions he was asking, so at 19, I started learning about Judaism from books. When I was 23, I found the Long Beach Chabad Shul, and I learned to read Hebrew over there, haltingly, as I still do.

### **What brought you there?**

My mother's mother had died, and I had gone back to the funeral in New York. I have two other first cousins on that side. One had married out of the faith and had converted many years prior, and the other one had Hebrew School-age children and had not yet put them in Hebrew School. My grandmother was a woman that, from the time she came to this country, had never eaten outside of her own home because she didn't trust anybody else's kashrut. I thought to myself, their paths were already set, and mine wasn't, because I was 23 and

unmarried. So that's what set me on the track really.

It was 1973, and I lived in Lakewood, which is next door to Long Beach. I was driving down Atlantic, where the Long Beach Chabad Shul is and I saw a gentleman out there with black pants and a white shirt doing yard work between the street and the shul. I finally just called and went for a women's event. They were very nice on the phone, and I ended up meeting people that I'm still friendly with, including the gentleman, Rabbi Engel, who was out there doing yard work. I would go and spend Shabbats with them.

I met my husband through a Jewish Singles' group, and married in a Conservative synagogue because that was going to be the greatest comfort level for everybody. When we ended up joining a synagogue, it was a Conservative synagogue because we were living here in Yorba Linda, and there were not a lot of choices at that time. It was either that or Beth Tikvah, which is Reform, and we had looked at Reform and sort of walked away. The closest Conservative synagogue was Beth Emet in Anaheim, and that's where

we joined. We were there for a number of years.

Actually I met Rabbi Eliezrie while we were members of Beth Emet. Our oldest daughter went to a preschool that he had at the old Jewish Federation Complex in Garden Grove. From there we put that daughter and her younger sister in the Hebrew Academy.

During that time, I took some classes with Rabbi Eliezrie, but we still had membership at Beth Emet.

**Were you leaning toward preferring Orthodoxy at that time?**

I had always leaned that way because I had done all my learning such as it was within Chabad in Long Beach, so yes, I was.

I started working for Rabbi Eliezrie when he had a storefront shul in a strip mall on Brookhurst. He eventually moved from one storefront to another in the same strip mall, so I worked in both shuls.

My son was born while I was working for Rabbi Eliezrie. My son had the forethought to be born on a Sunday, so the bris was the

next Sunday. We had the bris in the shul, which was great because the mohel had no problems coming at lunchtime because he knew he would be able to eat there.

**What was your job with the shul, and what was going on at the shul at that time?**

I was the Rabbi's bookkeeper. "Poor as a church mouse" often has a real meaning when it comes to a shul, and that certainly was the case. They were always scrambling because they had a very large Conservative shul there. Orthodoxy at that point—in the late '70s, early '80s—was not very big in Orange County at all, so it was a real struggle.

**So it was a struggling little community.**

Very much so, yes. And we knew he needed to move out of the Anaheim area because the demographics were changing dramatically and very quickly. The Jewish immigration tended to be more south towards Irvine. Chabad of Irvine already existed, so he was looking for something in Anaheim Hills or Yorba Linda. And there was nothing up here.

He found a piece of land in Anaheim Hills. The Rebbe was still alive at that time, and the Rebbe told him, “Do not buy that land,” so he did not.

One day I was just driving down the road probably to the Von’s near here, and there was an old two story, yellow farmhouse with a fruit stand in front, and a barn-like storage shed in back. I saw they had put a “For Sale” sign on it. So I went in the next day, Monday, and I said to the Rabbi, “This place just went up for sale.” And he contacted them, and ended up buying it.

The yellow house was on a septic tank, had abysmal plumbing, and had no working heater. Rabbi Eliezrie’s secretary and I brought in space heaters for the office we were in upstairs. There was a rickety, old, wooden staircase that creaked when you walked upstairs to his office and the other bedrooms upstairs. Downstairs there was a kitchen, a tiny dining room, small living room and a bathroom that couldn’t be used because the plumbing didn’t work. I think he eventually had the toilet repaired so it was functional, but the shower was off limits.

The shul was the living room, which had a fireplace. There was a dining room so, if we needed it, he could put the women in the dining room and the men in the living room. The upstairs functioned as offices and school rooms for the Hebrew School.

**Did people like the fact that it was so “homey”, or were some members uncomfortable?**

It depends how generous you were at that point in time. My children have memories of bouncing on their behinds down the stairs, because they’d entertain themselves that way when we would bring them to services.

One thing I’ve always liked about Chabad is that it’s very child-friendly, and if the children come, they’re not expected to sit like stones for the entire service. They get up, and they move. So my children and others would come, and they would go up and down the stairs.

We’ve gone back and forth between many shuls and have come back into Chabad after years away. We went back into Conservative Judaism for the socialization aspect of the children, but there, children are truly expected to be seen and not heard. Here in

Chabad they know the children are going to be heard as well as seen.

When we went back to my nephew's Bar Mitzvah in Atlanta, a family-type member came down with his oldest son, who was eight at the time. This was just a couple of years ago. This man is very frum, and the family goes to an Orthodox shul to which they walk. The little boy was running around all the time in the Conservative synagogue. Everybody else was aghast, and my husband and I were laughing because we knew this was a child that went to an Orthodox shul, and that this was how children frequently act in an Orthodox shul. The whole atmosphere with children is different within Orthodoxy than it is in Reform and Conservative.

My children are 18, 22 and 24 now. Right after my 18-year-old's Bar Mitzvah we were here for a service, and he decided that he was much more comfortable here. As soon as he finished his confirmation at the Conservative synagogue, he said, "I don't ever want to go there again." He refuses to go into a Reform synagogue; he dislikes them intensely because he cannot tolerate the truncated service. He comes here. I can't



say he comes as regularly as I would like, but for the average teenage boy living in Orange County, California, he probably comes pretty normally.

I come most weeks. My husband comes rarely. My daughters - one comes more often than the other. She won't go to other shuls, but she'll regularly come here. She's in her "I'm not sure there's a God" phase. We were here before she was three years old, we were attending Chabad, and this is her earliest memory of attendance, so she finds a comfort in a full service. None of my kids like a truncated service.

**Are there other comments you have about the structure and growth of this shul?**

Rabbi Eliezrie had associate rabbis at one point, because that was what all the Chabad houses were doing for Hebrew school at that time. They were sort of growing too big beyond their britches: "Oh, we'll have the associate rabbi, we'll have the bookkeeper, we'll have the secretary, we'll have the public relations person." Then they realized they couldn't afford all of that, so then they all pulled back. We had two associate rabbis that I know of that came through here, but

they both moved on to places where they have their own levels of success. Now he has his son-in-law working with him, so he still has an assistant rabbi. Like other Chabads, it has become a family business, and that gives another unique perspective to it.

We went through some problems part way through a year at the Hebrew Academy, because of transportation issues. My husband and Rabbi Eliezrie were screaming at each other on the phone. I said to my husband, "I hope you don't hold this against him," and my husband said, "No, I don't hold this against him; he's just doing his job. I understand that this is his job." He wouldn't take this from other people, but he'll take this from Rabbi Eliezrie because he understands that his job is to try and make us more Jewish. My husband has volunteered and done things here, too. For example, my husband built the original ark here and the original ark on Brookhurst.

We were not here when they started really trying to raise the funds and build this building. We really came back within the last four years. I really never lost my preference for an Orthodox service. We had gone to first day Rosh Hashanah at the shul

we were going to, and three of us understood the rabbi's sermon in a way that didn't please us. So we did not go to shul the second day of Rosh Hashanah. At that point, we stopped going there, and for Yom Kippur, we came here. That was the point when my son truly said, "I never want to go back there."

### **What appeals to you now about coming here?**

I like the intimacy of it. There are regulars that come most every week, and there is a familiarity with that, and because we are so few, it's like we are a little friendlier towards each other. It can be a very supportive place here. When my father was ill and then passed away, I had a lot of support here. I couldn't believe the number of people that came out every single night—I had up to 60 or 70 people in the house for shiva. A great majority of them were from here, and they had brought food. They were just truly, truly wonderful people.

### **It sounds like it feels like a real community.**

It is very much a real community here, very much a real community. And Rabbi Eliezrie and I have our own personal history because

I worked for him for three years, so he and his wife are friends. I think that makes a difference, too, in our perception of the congregation.

**What are your thoughts and hopes about the future of the shul?**

I hope the shul continues to grow. I hope that there really is a Jewish corner of North Orange County; that everybody doesn't slide to the South, because I think it's important that as Jews we are everywhere. I really sincerely hope that there will be people who find their way here, who like it here and stay here and this is what they choose to expose their children to, whether their children choose to remain in Orthodoxy or not. I plan to stay here.

Rabbi and Stella Eliezrie really put themselves out a hundred percent of the time, and I would say that their personal lives frequently take the back seat to the lives of this congregation and the needs of this congregation. Fortunately, a couple times due to dire illness within their family, we've been able to give back to them. I think that in many ways, Rabbi and Stella Eliezrie are extraordinary people!



**SAM EIFERMAN**

**Let's talk about your background and what led you to this shul.**

I was born in the Bronx, at the Bronx Hospital, back in the early '40s. At a young age, I lived across the street from an Orthodox synagogue, so I never knew that a Conservative or Reform synagogue even existed.