

# A Jewish Heart

Dr. Bernard Natelson | Board Member, Alpert Jewish Community Center

As I reflect on what led to my choices in life and ultimately to my involvement with our Jewish community, I keep hearing my mother's words. She always told me that I had a Jewish heart. I believe that it is the essence of this concept of adhering to Jewish values and having my Jewish identity permeate my actions that still guides me today.

My story begins in Elizabeth, New Jersey where I was born and raised. We belonged to an Orthodox shul and had a Kosher home. My father, Reuben, was

the eighth child in a family of nine. His family has been in the United States since the mid-1800s. The family business, Natelson Brothers, established in 1888, was a small chain of retail men's clothing stores in the New Jersey area. My dad met my mom, Helen, at Battin High School in Elizabeth, and both of them went on to become college graduates which was not yet the norm for that generation of Jewish young adults. Our family emphasized tradition but I attended public schools and lived a more secular lifestyle



At this year's Above and Beyond event Lisa and I enjoyed the company of Craig and Sherri Sussman.

while attending the University of Pennsylvania as an undergraduate. During my freshman year at Penn, however, I frequently went to the University Hillel for Shabbos dinners on Friday evenings. Hillel served as a home away from home where I was able to meet and socialize with new friends.

My education continued with a Masters of Clinical Psychology at Purdue and a Doctor of Psychology degree from Rutgers. My career as a psychologist has been a rewarding one (I am now semi-retired) insofar as I have enjoyed being able to help solve people's problems so they can cope better with life's more trying moments. There were times when Jewish teachings allowed me to help others deal with grief. I was able to share with them the customs and rituals surrounding the death of a loved one that are built into



Celebrating my 70th birthday and the anniversary of my Bar Mitzvah by chanting my original Haftorah at Temple Beth Shalom.

our tradition characterized by Minions, offered as a means to mourn the dead.

Wanting to help others also led to my interest in mentoring. Over the years I have mentored students through the Power 4 Youth program in the Long Beach schools, and mentored graduate students in psychology at Rutgers University. When a close friend of mine suddenly died leaving his 5-year-old child with his mother, I made an effort to help her by spending a lot of time with him, whom I call my godson. I am proud say that he has grown into an accomplished young adult who is making his place in the world as an attorney.

I moved out to Long Beach in 1981. Years later, I had the good fortune of meeting my wife at the Stephen S. Wise Temple in LA. After that, life changed for the good. Subsequently, we moved together to Belmont Heights and became more involved in the Jewish Community.

Today, we are active members of Temple Beth Shalom in Long Beach and Lisa has been on the Temple Board for the last eight years. Lisa loves being involved in state, local and international organizations. She has been an integral part of the Greater Long Beach section of the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) for the past eight years, currently serving as the Co-Vice President for Programs. Lisa, who is a California native, did not have a formal Jewish upbringing and my brother-in-law

has given me credit for getting her more involved with Jewish Life, a distinction that I truly treasure.

However, it was exposure to Lisa's work with NCJW and all the events that they held at the Alpert Jewish Community Center (AJCC) that led to me becoming more involved in AJCC activities. First, I became a regular at the fitness center and then I began to attend events, like the Jewish Film Festival, annual meetings, Jewish Studies lectures and other cultural/educational experiences. I enjoyed having conversations with the staff who were truly interested in my ideas.

My volunteer work includes teaching Osher Lifelong Learning Institute classes on short stories, the New York Times Crossword Puzzle and I am currently teaching Poems by W.B. Yeats and e.e. cummings. It was only a matter of time before I joined the AJCC Board. One of my dream projects is to build an interest in the broader community in films that showcase Jewish heritage. I work on ways to increase the staff training on Jewish heritage by supporting the attendance of staff at the Jewish Film Festival. I currently also serve on the Fitness Committee and Lisa and I are members of the AJCC Chai Society (enhanced giving program). As a board member, I am proud of our community and our staff and the way that we were able to rally during COVID-19 and continue to serve the community. The adaptability of Jewish communities throughout history, during stressful times, is one of the reasons we are still here.



Celebrating my 50th birthday at the Shenandoah Restaurant with family (clockwise from left): my mother, Helen Natelson; my youngest brother, Daniel; his wife, Bernice; my wife, Lisa; me (at the foot of the table); Alice, my brother Benjamin's wife; my oldest brother Benjamin; younger brother, Andrew; and my father, Reuben.

I choose to give to the AJCC because I see firsthand where the money is going and I am personally involved with the work being done. It is with great enthusiasm that I am looking forward to the upcoming integration of the AJCC and Jewish Long Beach. I believe it is wise to combine the strengths of each agency and not be separate. After all, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. I am also looking forward to working on more outreach to the Greater Long Beach community. The value of Tikkun Olam, repairing the world, is something that Lisa and I are dedicated to through our philanthropy and volunteer work. In addition to our involvement with Temple Beth Shalom and the AJCC, we support Israel Bonds. I have travelled to Israel numerous times and joined on a Jewish mission to Cuba delivering wheel chairs and medical supplies to the Jewish population. I also do pro-bono mediation work for small claims cases in the Orange County Court system. There I can employ my skills as a psychologist in helping facilitate the differences the parties bring to the table to create a solution both can accept. A successful mediation circumvents a hearing where a judge has to make a decision that often can be arbitrary.

On a personal note, another project that I am involved with and that I consider part of my personal legacy is my blog which covers a wide range of topics and now has over 100 readers. I write about a variety of topics, one of my next blogs will be about the meaning of Teshuva. I invite you to go to [www.drbernardnatelson.com](http://www.drbernardnatelson.com), scroll down to where it says click here if you wish to read my blogs, and send any comments you wish. If you disagree with my viewpoint, that's fine with me as I am open to reading what others have to say about my ideas.

We have an obligation as Jews to pass down our heritage and traditions to the next generations, L'Dor V'Dor. Ensuring that our Jewish Community endures through vibrant synagogues and community centers is central to that obligation. Join me in making my parents proud, get involved and create a path that comes from your Jewish heart. 