

Beth Chayim Chadashim
December 2, 2005
Shabbat Toledot

Drash by Harriet Perl
Celebrating her 85th birthday

I feel very lucky to be here tonight. For me this is a family gathering. My biological family is gone, but I have friends and I have BCC. I emphasize this because tonight welcomes new members to BCC, and I want you to know that many years from now, when your relatives may be gone, you will still have family here at BCC.

I thank my dear friends who came from afar to help me celebrate my 85th birthday. I am a fortunate woman.

Eighty-five years of American history – I've lived through some amazing and tumultuous times. So maybe this talk is a history lesson, but don't cringe. It hasn't been dull for me and I hope it won't be for you. And besides, I'm going to leave out plenty - this is not a tell-all therapy session.

In early November of 1920 my mother went to the polls to vote – the 19th Amendment had finally passed. I went with her, out of necessity. I was in utero, not exiting for several weeks, but I was there for that first women's vote. To most of you, women voting seems normal, an always thing, but the vote for women happened in my lifetime.

The Great Depression marked my early years. It is just statistics to most of you, but for me it is the memory of a 16 year-old girl coming out of the shadows to offer herself as a prostitute to a male friend – for ten cents. And I remember the cardboard insert in the shoes of my best girlfriend, because shoe repairs cost money she didn't have. Yet Hershey's bulk chocolate was 20 cents a pound, and a one-pound loaf of bread was a nickel. But the minimum wage for the ones lucky enough to have jobs was 25 cents an hour.

The Depression also meant FDR, who saved capitalism while the Republicans accused him of socialism. Roosevelt and the Democrats gave us Social Security, unemployment insurance, fair labor laws, bank safety regulations, the minimum wage, and much more. The NYA -- National Youth Administration – helped me through college with its generous wage of 50 cents an hour. Please note that it was Liberals (gasp!) who provided us those advances in decency, and that the Republicans fought against every one of them. It happened in my lifetime, and I am living to see the Republicans still trying to take it all away from us...

And there was the Holocaust. We knew it was happening but we didn't really understand it fully until the American and Russian troops opened the camps. Then newspapers put out special editions full of photographs - everyone in the world saw them. Where are they now, when a full generation is growing up without visible evidence of where anti-Semitism leads?

I was already teaching during World War II – my first salary was \$150 a month – so during the summers I worked graveyard shift in the shipyards. I was a pipe fitter's helper, union card, steel-toed shoes, hardhat, the works. I carried 36 inch wrenches across 12 inch wide staging above a fatal drop of hundreds of feet into the ship's hold, scared but willing. The benefit -- I enriched my vocabulary of curses and obscenities which I have needed and used. Moreover, I earned more money as an unskilled shipyard worker than I did as a teacher, though teachers were considered so important that they were "frozen" in their jobs, and I wasn't allowed to join the Women's Army Corps, though I tried.

After the war, we had McCarthy, who succeeded in destroying for a time all freedom of political thought and speech. He listed organizations he claimed were communist – I belonged to a bunch of them – and forced loyalty oaths on all of us. This man said Shirley Temple was a commie, and the American people, except for a very few with guts, knuckled under to him. That’s how Hitler came to power, put there by those who believe in shut-up-and-follow-the-leader and profess all the “correct” ideas and values. If you see a similar pattern in American politics now, good for you.

World War II was supposed to be the last war. The atom bomb would insure that. So the United States went abroad to war in Korea, in Vietnam, in Kuwait and now in Afghanistan and Iraq. In each war, those who protested were branded as unpatriotic if not traitors. That many wars in one lifetime!

Beginning in the 1950s there was the Civil Rights movement, and after horrors and heroism, the nation started on the path to acknowledging the rights of African Americans. On the heels of that fight came the feminist movement for women’s rights. It became the biggest thing in my life, especially because it fed the long process of validation for gays and lesbians. And a major event of that exciting time was the creation of the world’s first gay/lesbian synagogue, BCC – which was quickly granted membership in Reform Judaism. Please note that no other religious denomination has yet given membership to a gay/lesbian congregation. Feminism too was only partially successful: we got a few good laws and can be called Ms., but we are still not in the Constitution, and are still not seriously considered for the presidency.

But history is more than wars and politics. In my lifetime I’ve seen many changes that probably don’t make it into the history books. Radio – I remember the first time I heard a radio. I was about five and it was a crystal set with many dials. I looked into the next room to see where the voice was coming from. And TV: it has changed our lives, turned political contests into fundraisers and 30 second arguments, as well as entertaining us and bringing us together during crisis. And of course, history was made on TV when my hero Ellen DeGeneres came out. I could hardly believe it was happening in my lifetime.

I had the pleasure of being here when the railroads were magnificent enjoyments as well as luxurious and efficient transportation. I rode the Chief and the Sunset Limited and the 20th Century limited – all just names by now, but great joy for me. I was even lucky enough to travel during the era of the great ships going to Europe. Oh, the Michelangelo!

Plastics. They’ve changed our world. I remember the first nylon stockings – just before World War II. I was particularly overjoyed by then because during high school and college I couldn’t wear silk stockings: some of us were boycotting Japan, which was warring against China. So I went to my college prom in strapless formal and cotton stockings. It was not easy to have strong beliefs then or now. I can’t imagine the world without plastics in every part of our lives, but my childhood and most of my adolescence knew only cellophane and celluloid. I even remember when scotch tape came out, in the 1930’s – a real blessing.

So many other changes that we take for granted: refrigeration and air conditioning. Movies that talk – I saw one of the first talkies when I was about six: it was Rudolph Valentino in “Alias Jimmy Valentine” and I can still remember the shock when sound burst forth at a critical moment in the plot. (I still remember that plot, too. I’ll tell you some other time.)

I saw Pavlova dance – she was the swaying swan, a mere white blur on the stage, but I can still hear my parents whispering to me, “Remember, you’ve seen Pavlova dance!” and the thrilling sound of a live orchestra tuning up.

In my lifetime teachers in Los Angeles went on strike for the first time. I walked the picket line for 23 days. And I also remember that from the beginning of my teaching career I knew I could be fired in an

instant if anyone - student, teacher, principal, or just someone else out there - learned that I was a lesbian. Fired and permanently blackballed as well.

I remember BCC in its early days, and my wonderment as I looked around at all those people – maybe fifty of them! – who were acknowledging their homosexuality just by being there. Amazing to me, who didn't know such a thing existed when I began to suspect, at the age of five, that something terrible and unspeakable was the matter with me. And now in my lifetime there is a gay/lesbian caucus in the teachers' union with openly gay/lesbian politicians who get elected, and civil unions, and soon there will be marriage rights. All that after a lifetime of being so far back in the closet that I couldn't even see a door out.

Eighty-five years have spawned miraculous inventions and events, like antibiotics, a man on the moon, automatic transmissions in cars, mixed blessings like freeways and airplane travel. But those years also have brought a resurgence of proto-fascist political movements, the power of the Christian right, and horrible politicians like Nixon and Bush. We've lost twice a day postal deliveries, and gasoline service stations, and gained computers, faxes, Xerox, and rappers. I suppose it all balances out, along with global warming and nuclear proliferation, microwaves, and frozen food, and a woman president on TV at least.

That is the history of my 85 year life so far. The future? In old age there isn't much future left. But there is HOPE. I want to live to see a woman president. How about a 2008 ticket of Hillary and Obama? And how about a new BCC building – with a parking lot? I can hope – and if you hope, too, the future may be even more interesting than the past.