

Jesse A. Epstein

Personal Statement: Experiences That Shaped my Journey to Today

**“Blessed are You, Who makes us holy through Your commandments,
and commands us to light lights”**

(From the Hanukkah Blessings)

Before my rabbinic journey began, I worked as an Emergency Medical Technician, often finding myself as a source of comfort for people in their most vulnerable moments—holding the hands of scared children, performing CPR on those without a pulse, and sitting with the elderly in their fear and pain. One night in late December, my team responded to the home of an elderly woman with a severe leg infection. She had no children, her husband had passed away years before, and she met our efforts to help her with hostility.

I noticed a small Hanukkiah in a glass case and gently asked if she had celebrated Hanukkah yet. “I haven’t celebrated that child’s holiday in years,” she spat, her words sharp and dismissive. I asked if she would mind if I sang the blessings, and to my surprise, she agreed. As I began to chant, her voice joined mine, softly at first, then stronger. Her demeanor shifted—her resistance to medical care melted, and she cooperated with us as we tended to her leg. When we finished, she thanked me with a warmth and spirit that felt like the room itself had been illuminated.

That night, I understood my true calling. I realized that my work was not meant to end with caring for people’s physical health—it was meant to encompass their entire being: their emotions, their spirit, and their sense of connection. The blessings we recite on Hanukkah remind us of the sacred act of kindling lights, and that night, it became clear to me that I was meant to show up for people as a rabbi, bringing light to their lives when they needed it most.

“Blessed are You, Who has given us Your Torah and planted eternal life within us”

(From the Blessing for an Aliyah, Before the Torah Reading)

Sally wasn’t like her best friend Clara, whose Bat Mitzvah had been just two weeks earlier. While Clara had a natural connection to Hebrew and Torah study, Sally struggled. Despite her best efforts, Hebrew felt foreign, the prayers overwhelming, and the text uninspiring. Her confidence faltered as the big day approached, especially under the weight of inevitable comparisons to Clara’s success.

In one of our lessons a few weeks before her Bat Mitzvah, I noticed Sally’s eyes glazing over as we worked through the liturgy. She seemed close to shutting down entirely. But I remembered something she had shared with me earlier: her love for playing the saxophone. I turned to Psalm 150, a prayer she already knew musically, and asked if she knew what it meant. She didn’t, so I explained—it’s a celebration of instruments, of music used in the ancient Temple to elevate the spirit and build community. As we explored the text, Sally’s eyes lit up. For the first time in weeks, she seemed engaged. “Could there be music at my Bat Mitzvah service?” she asked, almost shyly. And then, before I could answer: “Could I play my saxophone?”

Her mother, standing nearby, began to interject, “Sally, that’s not something—” but I cut her off. “Yes,” I said, “let’s do it.” Sally’s joy was palpable, and I knew this could be the connection she needed. I found saxophone sheet music for Psalm 150, and Sally practiced until she was ready not just to participate in the service, but to lead with her instrument.

On the day of her Bat Mitzvah, Sally's saxophone was hidden behind the bima, a surprise for the congregation. When we reached Psalm 150, I handed it to her, and she began with an instrumental verse before the congregation joined in with song. Sally beamed with pride, her music elevating the moment beyond anything this small synagogue had ever experienced. The congregation was radiant with joy, and Sally carried that newfound confidence through the rest of the service, chanting her Torah and Haftarah portions beautifully.

In that moment, Sally reminded me why I chose to become a rabbi: to meet people where they are, to find the sparks that ignite their connection to Judaism, and to fan those sparks into lasting light. The instruments of Psalm 150 were ancient, but their power was alive in Sally, showing her—and the congregation—how Jewish tradition could resonate through her own passions and gifts.

Blessed are You who has made me a Jew. Blessed are You who has made me in the Image of G-d. Blessed are You who has made me free.¹

(From the Blessings for Daily Miracles)

During my time studying in Israel, I joined the Women of the Wall for a Rosh Chodesh service at the Kotel. As a man, my role was to form a barrier outside the women's section, shielding them from the hostility of those attempting to disrupt their prayer. For over an hour, I endured the piercing shrill of whistles, felt the heat of spit hitting my skin, and heard insults hurled in both Hebrew and English. Before long, I felt the bruises forming on my shins where I was being repeatedly kicked. I was called "Nazi," "pig," and "pedophile." Even "Reform" was spat out with venom, as if it were the most damning insult imaginable.

It was the first time I experienced such visceral hatred. As a straight, cisgender man, I had never been the target of homophobic or transphobic rhetoric, but standing with Women of the Wall, I was labeled "gender-fluid" in an attempt to diminish my humanity. The venom in their words made it clear that my presence—and the values I stood for—challenged their vision of Judaism.

And yet, amid the chaos, I stood firm. Not only out of solidarity, but because I believe no Jew should ever feel unwelcome in a sacred space. The Women of the Wall embody a principle I hold dear: that Judaism must expand to include all who seek meaning within it. Their resilience in the face of hate demonstrated the power of prayer to unite and anchor a community.

This experience shaped my vision of leadership. In the face of division, I am called to create Jewish spaces that are radically inclusive and welcoming. I want to ensure that our sanctuaries and communal spaces reflect the diversity of Jewish identity, where all congregants—regardless of gender, background, beliefs, or even a lack of belief—feel they belong.

As a rabbi, I strive to take these values beyond the walls of the synagogue, fostering an open tent of belonging in every program, interaction, and teaching. But I also know that our synagogues themselves must be safe and sacred homes for all. That day at the Kotel deepened my conviction to ensure that every member of the Jewish community has a place to stand—not just physically, but spiritually—where they can find connection, meaning, and purpose.

¹ Earlier versions of these blessings, as found in traditional liturgy, included the phrasing "שְׁלֹא עָשָׂנִי אִשָּׁה" (she-lo asani isha, "who has not made me a woman"), reflecting historical gender dynamics in Jewish prayer. This more inclusive version reflects contemporary Reform values of equality and respect for all genders.