L’dor v’dor — sometimes with a twist

By Jessica Taper
Special to the TJP

As Jews, Judaism is the religion we know, and for many of us, it has a significant role in the way in which we think, act and go about living our daily lives.

Each generation hopes they do a good job passing it down to the next and keeping its traditions and its importance relevant for the next generation. Most of us learn it through our parents, our spouse, Jewish youth groups, college affiliations, camps or some combination of those places. We get married and when it is time to raise children we start to focus on it more.

When people enter into a mixed marriage there can be challenges, and hopefully those issues are resolved before children are brought into the picture so religion is an important part of their upbringing rather than a point of contention.

When Marcia and James Webb were married, they knew some day they would have children, and although Marcia was Jewish and James was Christian, they agreed their children would be raised Jewish. James totally embraced Judaism; he attended High Holy Days services with Marcia, they hosted Shabbat dinners and Passover Seders and he enjoyed learning the moral lessons and the Jewish commitment to tikkun olam — repairing the world.

Ironically, when the Webbs decided to move to Plano in 2001, it was James who found Congregation Beth Torah and enrolled their 3-year-old son Max in the preschool. Marcia was still in Florida with Max and their 6-week-old son Joey but they wanted Max to start preschool as soon as they officially moved to Plano. The preschool experience started the Webbs’ connection with Congregation Beth Torah.

“I don’t know if we jumped in with both feet or we were roped in, but we became very involved with Beth Torah,” James said. “We made friends with members of the synagogue who immediately became our Dallas family, and the leadership of the congregation welcomed me as a part of their Beth Torah family.”

The boys both grew up through the preschool. They progressed through the Learning Center and both started attending Camp Young Judaea after second grade.

The synagogue was the center of their life. Marcia joined the adult b’nai mitzvah class and Max became a bar mitzvah in March 2011.

“It was a whirlwind and I remember that feeling of pride watching Max on the bimah. The shy preschooler who did not like even being on stage was up there leading this service,” said James. “The celebration was great and my family enjoyed being a part of it all.”

In November 2011, they got a March 2014 date for Joey’s bar mitzvah and then, everything changed. Three weeks later, Marcia was unexpectedly diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and given very little chance at recovery. Marcia made her friends promise that no matter what, Joey’s bar mitzvah had to be as perfect as Max’ was. She knew James would make it happen, but she wanted him to know he would have the same support system she did.

In June 2012 Marcia passed away. “In her final moments, I promised her that I would love her forever and that I would continue to raise our boys Jewish,” James reflected. “I made that promise for two reasons — to honor Marcia and the moral and societal lessons I had learned from Judaism, and to provide a constant in my boys’ lives — Judaism is just a huge part of who they are.”

James sent the boys to Camp Young Judaea that summer — it was another step in keeping their lives on track. When they came...
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The Marcia Fischer Webb Youth Lounge at Congregation Beth Torah
Friends for holiday dinners. James and Cathy have continued to host family and friends for holiday dinners and are there to support others in the community.

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2016-2017 Eighth Grader’s picture (above with Nate Levine) is currently in Israel for Levine Academy’s Annual Gerda Vogel Marx Israel Experience. Marcia grew up at that temple and was encouraged by her sister Randy, a Melton graduate, to join the program in Dallas.

With the help of friends and family, James also made sure that Joey’s bar mitzvah was meaningful and memorable. “Joey’s bar mitzvah was an incredibly emotional experience. We wanted to pay tribute to Marcia, but we also knew she would have wanted us to keep the weekend focused on Joey,” reflected James.

By that time, James was dating his future wife, Cathy, and her family was included in the weekend too. Cathy is not Jewish, but she has also embraced the Jewish traditions and hosts family and friends for holiday dinners. James and Cathy attend High Holy Day services and are there to support others in the community.

Submitted photo
The Marcia Fischer Webb Youth Lounge at Congregation Beth Torah

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Max made his first trip to Israel through Camp Young Judaea's Tel Yehudah program in high school and then decided to spend his first year of college, in Israel, in a program called Year Course. James, Cathy and Joey went to visit Max in December. “I was so nervous letting him go do this program, but to watch him embrace his Jewish roots and call Jerusalem his city is inspiring,” James remarked. “For me the trip brought things full circle — we toured Israel from both Jewish and Christian points of view. One day I would see all of the things that I learned as a child in church and the next day we were touring and discussing the things that I learned as an adult through the lessons of Judaism.”

James said they felt very much a part of Israel and their tour guides actually thanked him and Cathy for continuing to raise and encourage Max and Joey to be involved in Judaism.

Joey is now a sophomore in high school and is very involved in BBYO, where he is currently serving as vice president of Lacey AZA.

When Marcia passed away, things could have gone very differently. James was raised in a Christian home and both his brothers are preachers at Baptist churches — one in Louisiana and the other in Mississippi. His religion is a very important part of who he is. While he readily admits it is not always easy being Christian in a Jewish home, he would not have changed a thing and he values the lessons he has learned through being exposed to both religions. Not only has James kept his promise to Marcia, but also he continues to pass on a beautiful lesson of honor, commitment and tolerance.

No one can anticipate the twists of life. What a tribute it is to Marcia’s memory and to James’ character that he picked up the pieces and is ensuring that the torch is passed on to the next generation.

Cindy Sher is the executive editor of Chicago’s JUF News.