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The Making of a Storyteller



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When Jennifer Rudick Zunikoff invited a storyteller into her religion class during the middle of the 1994 school year, she was amazed at how it transformed her students: how attentive and engaged they became. As a 22-year-old recent college graduate teaching middle school, she had never witnessed her students so engrossed in the subject matter before. It was then that she began to realize how powerful stories could be. As she watched her students connect to Judaism through these ancient tales, she knew that she wanted to become a storyteller.

Soon, she was sharing stories with adults and children at her synagogue. Telling stories became a powerful way to share personal Jewish experiences. They also were a vehicle for teaching Jewish history and fostering a love for the Jewish people.

In December 1994, Zunikoff traveled to Israel for the first time. Arriving at the Kotel, she felt disconnected from Wall and from her fellow Jews. As the weeks passed, she visited holy sites and learned more about Jewish history. The other participants became friends. When she visited the Wall for the final time on that trip, she softly touched the stones of the Kotel. Zunikoff then felt that she, and every Jew, was an integral part of the Jewish people. Her experience at the Kotel became her first personal performance piece.

In the late 1990s, Zunikoff traveled through the western United States, performing Jewish stories and teaching workshops for teachers. In San Rafael, California, she performed for a Jewish day school where Holocaust scholar Yaffa Eliach was speaking the same day. "I learned so much from meeting Dr. Eliach," she recalled. "After speaking with her, I knew that I also needed to tell stories about the Holocaust. Not only stories about the horrors, but stories about the normal lives of the Jewish people before they were so horribly disrupted."

In 2004, Zunikoff began co-teaching the "Oral History of the Holocaust" course at Goucher College. During the ten years she has co-taught the course, more than 100 students have shared the story of dozens of local Holocaust survivors. Jennifer coaches the students to tell the stories of the survivors' lives before, during and after the war. The students share the beauty in their survivors' lives as well as the terror they experienced.

Crafting the stories of your people is at once life-affirming and humbling to Zunikoff. "I wasn't there when... by sharing the stories, I can honor our ancestors and our tradition."

