

You may recognize me—as a Past President, and as someone who often leads dovening, or chants Torah or Haftorah. You probably think of me as one of those people who seem to know what they are doing in the sanctuary.

You may assume that I come from a religious family, and that I learned all of this stuff when I was little. But that is not the case.

So I'd like to tell you a little bit about my journey. My own family was not at all religious. They went to synagogue 3 days a year, but they insisted that I go to Hebrew School -- 4 afternoons a week for 5 years before my Bar Mitzvah. At that Hebrew School, as far as I remember, all we learned was how to read the prayer book. When at age 12 I had a Hebrew School teacher who told my class that if you did not keep all 613 commandments you might as well not keep any, well that sealed the deal. Once I passed the age of 13, I quit, and did not have much to do with Judaism for 20 years. As my own children grew up, though, we began to worry about their education. We sent them to Sunday school, and I began to go to synagogue every so often.

But it was not until I was close to 40, that our Rabbi in San Diego gave our congregation an assignment. He suggested that we should each take on one thing that year that we had not done before, even something as simple as candle lighting, or sitting down with the family for Shabbat dinner, to see whether that experience would be fulfilling.

We made a decision as a family to begin going to synagogue every Friday night and to come home to Shabbat dinner together. (If you have a teen-age child, ask me later how to make that work.) It brought us closer together as a family, and I began wondering whether Judaism had something to offer that I had missed as a child. So I began to take on one thing a year. I went to classes and read books. I realized that Judaism offered more than the picture of a God who lived on a throne on top of a cloud. Eventually, I became comfortable in the Synagogue, and I learned to doven and to chant Torah. And while none of that is easy, if you take it on one thing at a time it is doable.

So I encourage you to do that—take on one thing for the New Year that you don't already do. You might find it worthwhile, you might find that you become more comfortable in the synagogue, and you might even find some day that you are one of those people who seem to know what they are doing.