

JUNE: Some of you know us and our daughter Yaya's story. Many of you were there with us and carried us through the toughest time in our life. When Rabbi Latz asked us to speak this year, we reflected on what Shir Tikvah has meant to us. Not surprisingly, Yaya's story was significant, but not the only part of our journey with Shir Tikvah.

RON: When June and I first 'officially' joined Shir Tikvah 5 or so years ago, there were a number of things that attracted us. We had been the beneficiaries of the "Radical Hospitality" that we all know is a core value of this congregation, having attended several high holiday services as welcomed guests. We were drawn to Shir Tikvah's relentless pursuit of "Radical Social Justice". But what ultimately drew us to Shir Tikvah, is something perhaps less lofty but every bit as powerful, and that is Shir Tikvah's radical power to help us navigate the highs and lows that life throws at every single one of us. Call it: Radical Problem Solving. Over the past 5 years since becoming members of this community, our family has had many highs and lows together. Through it all, we have been the beneficiaries of Shir Tikvah's radical problem solving and witnessed the power of this community first hand.

RON: When we took our first step toward Shir Tikvah, we did so because we were dealing with a very practical problem and we believed that Shir Tikvah could help us solve it: June and I were falling in love, and we had many questions about whether, because of our religious and cultural differences - June is Chinese and doesn't identify with a religion and I identify as Israeli-American and Jewish - we could have the kind of life and family we wanted together. Could we have a home that was both Jewish and Chinese? What would our kids be? Would a rabbi even marry us?

JUNE: Over a series of lunches with Rabbi Latz at Wilde Roast, we explored the type of home and life we wanted to have. The values from our respective traditions that were most important to us. Through Michael's questioning, we learned that many of the most important things about our traditions - family, fairness/justice, tikkun olam - were quite similar. And Michael encouraged, and in fact taught us, to explore and celebrate our differences.

JUNE: This culminated in a stronger bond and, of course, a wedding! It was an awesome wedding that was born naturally out of our Wilde Roast sessions. We incorporated the Jewish traditions that were important to Ron - there was a huppah, we said the sheva brachot, and Ron stomped on some glass. But Michael encouraged us to incorporate Chinese tradition as well. There was lots of red. We had a traditional Chinese tea ceremony honoring our parents - a tradition that is different from any Jewish one but honors our shared value of family. It was one of the happiest times of our life, and Shir Tikvah helped us navigate and make the most of it.

RON: Not long thereafter, when our daughter Yaya was born, the congregation welcomed her. One of our treasured memories is from her baby naming. She had been napping in one of our arms during most of the services. Then when the time came for us to stand up together and for Yaya to be blessed by Rabbi Latz, I stood up holding her, and she lifted her head up and looked around. Everyone saw her face for the first time and a loud "ooooohhh" travelled through the sanctuary. She was beautiful, after all, objectively speaking. That simple gesture of love and support for her, and appreciation of her wonderfulness by our community, is something we will treasure always.

JUNE: Around the time of that evening, she started having developmental issues. Many visits to the pediatrician and specialists, MRI, EEG, many blood tests, three weeks in the hospital, multiple surgeries, and a feeding tube later, we found out that she had an ultra-rare and incurable neurological disorder called 4H Leukodystrophy. It was so rare that all that our geneticist could give us to learn about this disease were a few medical journal articles. Then 5 months later, Yaya died of her disease.

RON: It was, to put it mildly, the most difficult time in our life. Shir Tikvah was there with us through it all. Wendy, Rabbi Rappaport, and many of our Shir Tikvah friends – other young families with small children of their own - visited us in the hospital and checked in with us periodically. Yaya in particular enjoyed those play dates that she had with her little friends from our community. Rabbi Latz and Rabbi Rappaport offered much needed spiritual guidance. Our friends from Shir Tikvah kept us accompanied, fed, and feeling supported.

JUNE: We never thought that we could say goodbye to Yaya. We didn't know how. Rabbi Latz and the Shir Tikvah family smothered us – in a good way - through it all. We were so touched to see hundreds of family and friends coming to Shir Tikvah for Yaya's funeral. The shiva committee members took control of our house the week that followed, running shiva for 7 days, so that we didn't have to worry about anything, and so many of our Shir Tikvah friends came to visit.

RON: This community also helped us through our excruciating first year of mourning. At shiva, Rabbi Latz gave our friends a task – to think of a number between 1 and 52, and when that many weeks have passed, check in with us to see how we are doing. So many of you did just that, and hearing from you throughout the year provided great comfort. Michael advised us to observe the Jewish tradition of saying kaddish daily for a year, which we did, and which gave us space daily to devote to mourning and remembering Yaya. He also advised me to go to minyan, which I did. The minyan group was amazing, always there with a hug, a smile, a discreetly offered tissue when it looked like I needed it, and always willing to listen. Collectively, observation of these rituals and support from our community enabled us to slowly begin to move forward.

JUNE: Now we are embarking on a new journey, with Ilan. Now we get to worry about all the normal parenting questions – how do we raise a Jewish child? Do we conduct a brit? Ummm, why? Our Shir Tikvah friends have been with us through it all. Fun visits from friends with food during the busy first days of life with an infant. A loaner bassinet. Play dates. In these happiest of times, as in our saddest, our community lifts us.

JUNE: The point is, life will throw many challenges at us – some happy, some sad. Some common and some very, very uncommon. No matter what, we know that our community will be there to support us and help us move forward.

RON: We care about this community and this community has cared for us unconditionally, in happy times and in hard times. As a small token of our appreciation, we will be making a financial gift to Shir Tikvah during this High Holiday season. We invite you to join us. There are envelopes on your seats. Please be as generous as you can so we can all keep this community thriving for many years to come.