



I grew up in Niagara Falls in a Jewish community of about 40. I like to think of it as the last remaining shtetl in the world (there's a bunch about it in my first solo show *Cookie*). My immediate family of 15 (aunts and cousins grandparent, great-grandparents from the orig. shtetl) had Friday night dinner together every Friday till I left for university. I missed the food (you can't really make brisket for one) and family and started making Friday night dinners with friends from law school when I lived in Chicago across from 2nd City).

When I moved to SF I missed the food (Jewish food is an endangered species out here). I missed the interesting kind of conversations I had in college even more. I missed a sense of home after 28 addresses in 8 years. I missed connecting deeply with people. I missed it all so much that I decided a to make a space for all of that. I learned a lot about how to open people up very quickly and how to create a space for meaningful conversation which is like oxygen to me.

I did about 7-8 years of these Salons. I would cook, invite someone really interesting to me, ask them what they were passionate about, and then invite the others based on the topic. Sometimes it would be obviously Jewish-y, sometimes not at all.

Like I like to do, I subverted everything that drove me nuts, in this case about Jewish/family stuff. That meant I didn't prepare way ahead of time and I head everyone bring everything except the main dish (my mother would lose it preparing for a "function"). When we did bruchas I made them optional. I was almost apologetic about it. The last thing I want to do is mindlessly cram rote prayers or religion down someone's throat as it was passed on to me. The group was almost never all Jews and often I had pretty wayward Jews. I was pretty wayward myself.

Growing up in Niagara Falls pretty much cemented my identity as Jewish, but that didn't mean I liked being Jewish growing up. I did not like the Jews I was sent to summer camp to meet and learn to eroticize. I liked to play sports and canoe trip without a hair dryer. The Jews I met growing up were from cities and consider me a goy. I lived in enough of a ghetto growing up that I hated ghettos period.

But I did slowly realize that the values and warmth and humour I loved growing up, that is really Jewish, was part of these Shabbat Salons whether the people there were Jews or not. Actually having people who aren't Jewish is very important to making sure it's not an exclusive kind of thing. Ironically, it helped other wayward, Jewish-y people to come.

Once I'd gone through my own strange Jew-y re-understanding (a longer story than this discussion permits) I enjoyed letting go of the shame and re-defining it. But queers and black folks taught me how to do that. I was in the centre of the Net boom up here (since once I'd used the Net in 94 I knew it would democratize film distribution and then 5 shmucks wouldn't have the final say over everything, as it was when I left Hollywood) and the Shabbat Salons kept me sane. They became the most rewarding thing I'd ever done.

I found myself not letting people talk about work (since everyone was so wired and networking 24/7. Internet networking made Hollywood networking look extremely casual). Then I'd realized I'd backed into what was a Jewish "religious rule" about observing Shabbat. But I only realized that after everyone enjoyed themselves a lot. It was a space to be your Self. A person. Not just an executive or someone who could do something for

you.

I had guests like Wall Street journal tech columnist Kara Swisher talk about vengeance, my pal spoken word genius and intersex activist Thea Hillman talk about her activism and bodily integrity and gender. There were some amazing conversations around circumcision, especially between some interfaith couples. I had Jamie Williams, co-captain of the 49ers talk about film. I had a guy who was ba'al tshuva and a Torahmacher in Israel and then later ex-communicated and a gay leather slave in SF. I had Lisa Schiffman do her first reading from Generation J while she was still writing it. One of my favourites was when my friend who's a professor now (grad student then) in sociolinguistics explain intercultural communication. That has helped my relationship to no end with my midwest ex-pom pon captain fiancée.

As I started performing more on Friday nights I really missed my Salons. But I'd also made connecting with the audience part of my performing. I learned a lot about how to bring a larger room together and thread a much larger conversation really quickly. It's not important to me that it be called Jewish. It's important to me that it be a soulful place where different people can connect as their whole selves. It's the greatest feeling. And genuine diversity (yes this means not just Bennetton-ad diversity, but age, ideas, conservatism, everything) is really important. It's all about the mix. It's the contrast that allows the shared humanity to shine. For some reason I always think of Andy Goldsworthy's Rivers and Tides when I think of this. It's the ability to hold the difference in the room that leads to the magic.

There are so many talk shows that are all about selling stuff or argument. I want a culture in my life in which there is genuine inquiry, curiosity, the fun of learning without lecturing. The "audience" has so much to share. I want to really connect with people, and I'm not alone. Every time I've done The Heather Gold Show at the JCCSF it's been full with very little promotion.

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