

Jewish Legend Award
October 23, 2016
Sandy Eisenberg Sasso

Thank you. I am grateful and humbled by this honor. To the Indiana Jewish Historical Society and the Legends committee, my deepest appreciation. I would not be standing here today if my parents had not believed in me when others doubted me, if my childhood rabbi and mentor had not encouraged me when others sought to deter me, and if my family had not supported me. This recognition belongs to all of them.

Dennis and I have been Hoosiers for forty years. Forty years is the time our ancestors traveled through the desert. That journey is what we celebrate at this time Sukkot.

I must admit that when Dennis and I first decided to come to Indianapolis, we thought we would build a temporary home here (like a sukkah) and then move on. I was concerned that if being a woman rabbi in New York City was difficult, how much harder it would be to find acceptance in Indiana.

I worried that thick crusted rye and white fish salad, rugelach and chocolate bobka would not be food staples in the Midwest. I questioned whether being Jewish would make me an oddity in a landscape of church steeples, and being a feminist in a flatland of religious conservatism would brand me bizarre.

When we drove across the state line in 1977 to begin our rabbinical calling at Beth El-Zedeck, we listened to the local radio station. Someone was giving the soy bean report and pork belly futures. I thought, "Where in the world are we going? Could Indiana ever become our home?"

It did not take long before we traded our apartment for a house and were proud to begin calling ourselves Hoosiers. Growing up in Philadelphia, I never envisioned such a life. After all, who could have imagined that an Askenazi Jew who grew up on the East coast would meet a Sephardic young man from Panama in rabbinical school, fall in love with his Latin charm and end up working with him for 4 decades in the Midwest?

We had no idea that our marriage would make history. The only thing we knew some 46 years ago was that it would make us happy. And it has. The Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber's words best describe Dennis' and my unique partnership, "I am I because you are you, and you are you because I am I."

This is the city where our son, David grew up and our daughter, Debbie and two of our three grandsons were born. Here are the people who once said, "You don't look like a rabbi," but who now say, "This is what a rabbi looks like." Today no one thinks that a woman on the bimah is unusual. Thank you for taking a risk, and for welcoming me into your lives. I can't imagine who I would be without all of you, without this community.

Sukkot marks a journey, not a solitary passage, but a communal one. Our ancestors walked along with those they agreed and those they didn't, and they became one people, *am ehad*. On Sukkot we symbolically invite our ancestors into the Sukkah. We reach back to those who made a home for us, even as we reach out to build community.

When we journey back in time, we inhale the old and breathe out new life. The Jewish Historical Society helps us to remember the stories and the lives, the events and the places that still live in us and knowingly or not, shape our future. When we remember, extraordinary things can happen.

Jewish Legend Award
October 23, 2016
Dennis C. Sasso

I thank the Indiana Jewish Historical Society for this flattering recognition. It is especially meaningful to receive it with Sandy, and it is humbling to share it with the other distinguished honorees, both living and deceased.

I never would have anticipated the series of events that have led me to this time and place. From age thirteen, I knew that I wanted to be a rabbi. Three of my great-grandfathers had served as religious leaders: one, an ordained Rabbi in Turkey, the other two, lay readers-Hazanim of the small Spanish-Portuguese Sephardic Community in Colon, Panama, where I was born. I never knew them in person, but their stories and passions lived in me. I dedicate this award to them and to my beloved parents, Leita and Colman, of blessed memory, for their support and cheer.

I attended the Instituto Alberto Einstein, a Jewish day school that also served the general Panamanian community. I tutored in Hebrew the son of a President of Panama and officiated at the funeral of another President, a relative of the family. Panama is the only country outside of Israel that has had not one, but two Jewish heads of state. Panama's Jewry has been a part of the civic, economic and cultural landscape since the birth of the Republic. Growing up Jewish in Panama was natural, affirming and liberating. I was to become the first Panamanian-born ordained rabbi.

Upon completion of a year at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and graduation from Brandeis University, I headed to the newly founded Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia, a fortuitous decision that led me to the one who captured my heart and mind and nurtured my dreams. Being the first rabbinical couple was not for us then a matter of historic consciousness. We were two young people in love, idealistic students of Judaism, hoping to find meaning in our lives and somehow make a difference.

In 1977, Indianapolis beckoned and has been home for the past near forty years. Beth-El Zedeck took a chance on us, and we won the lottery. Sandy and I built a home, raised a family and carved a career path.

Here we raised our children and learned that the rabbinic path is more than a career; it is a calling, a lifestyle; it is who you are, 24/7. Multiply that times 365, times 40 years! Our children, David and Debbie knew that. We are proud of the grandchildren they have given us, Darwin, Ari and Levi, and how David, Debbie and Brad have continued to embrace Judaism into their personal and family lives.

I regard Judaism as neither supernatural nor metahistorical. Judaism is for me what Jews do and hope; it is our memories and our imagination. Judaism is a most satisfying and fulfilling way of growing as a person spiritually, grounded in community, inspired by moral values and adorned by holy traditions that reveal the godly in our lives and point to the possibilities of a better world.

Tonight we usher Shemini Atzeret-Simhat Torah. We will complete and begin again the reading of our people's earliest narrative, the Torah. That story is not finished. We continue to write it.

Today's acknowledgement of our contribution to our community, city and state on this bicentennial year for Indiana fills us with gratitude and with an awesome sense of responsibility. History matters. It is not merely something bequeathed to us, but something we together must dream and create.

Thank you all for being part of our story. Hag Sameach!