

“Hearing Into Speech: Doing the Extraordinary within the Ordinary.”
Sheila Michaels Memorial Lecture,
Sh’má Series, Jewish Federation of St. Louis. May 2018

Good evening. On behalf of our CRC community and Sheila’s family Howie Nathanson, Sarah Anne Patz and their daughters, I would like to thank Rabbi Nathan, Cyndee Levy and the Jewish Federation for remembering Sheila Michaels this evening. I was blessed to call her beloved friend, to know her as soul sister and to honor her as the one who brought me home to Judaism. When I met Sheila nearly 12 years ago it was inexplicable to meet a woman who had changed my life so concretely. For the world I was born into was not the world I grew up in because of the work that Sheila and multitudes of other activists did to change our story. They did so within the ordinary confines of their lives. Sheila herself did not believe what she did was extraordinary.

Sheila’s own story begins with painful brokenness. Her early years were marked by rejection at the most primary levels a child can endure. Conceived while her mother was having an affair, both Sheila’s step-father and biological father wanted nothing to do with her. When her parents divorced, Sheila was sent to live with her grandmother at the age of 3 returning home at age 8 when her mother remarried. Their family life was shaped by her mother’s alcoholism and her step-father who Sheila describes as a “big, bullying man”. Sheila understood what it meant to be marginalized, to be unwanted, and to be seen as expendable. Rather than harden her, these experiences endowed Sheila with a fierce compassion, tender heart and thirst for justice.

At age 20, Sheila was expelled from college for her radical ideas on censorship and de-segregation. Sheila cast her lot with those marginalized by law and racism joining the Civil Rights Movement full-time. She was motivated by her thirst for justice and to find her own freedom. Sheila states, it was reading Freedom Rider, Henry Thomas’ story in which he discusses his “illegitimate” birth that she understood, “I wanted to be free, myself. And I just wanted to have the courage to be able to stand up and say that and not be afraid of everything in the whole world.” Among her many roles in the Movement, Sheila trained for the Freedom Rides, served as one of only 6 female field secretaries for CORE and SNCC, worked side by side with leaders of the movement, co-wrote John Lewis’ speech for the March on Washington, and served as project manager in Hattiesburg Mississippi, the largest and most successful one during Freedom Summer.

In 1968, Sheila became a founding mother of the 2nd Wave of Feminism. The majority of women at that first meeting were experienced Civil Rights

Activists. In her writings, Sheila cites two key reasons for this. First, the experience of working in company of women of which Sheila says, “This was the first time in my whole life that I felt freedom, any kind of sense of equality. Most of the grassroots were women.”

Second, women activists were disheartened by the patriarchy and sexual harassment they experienced. Sheila’s oral history work and memoirs describe the many “Me Too” moments women endured. So they left, carrying its heart and principles, to seek their own freedom. To their skillset, they added consciousness raising which Sheila describes in this way, “The theologian Nelle Morton calls it “hearing into speech”… Through hearing others’ stories one begins to define one’s own problems and find one’s own sources of speech. Feminism and Al-Anon helped me find my voice.”

During her middle years, Sheila turned to what she understood as her most important activist work as an oral historian. Sheila had a unique vision for this work and was dedicated to capturing the stories of unsung grassroots activists. Sheila used the process of “hearing into speech” to invite interviewee’s to tell their inner story, “that” part of their story, which many and in particular women, resist sharing due to shame, pain, and fear of betraying their cause. For Sheila, the inner story is a critical key. In her words, when one sees their experience as “only personal, rather than being part of a syndrome of social ills, it causes many to devalue their injuries and contributions.” Knowing the inner story provides a clearer picture of history and the nature of revolutions, in Sheila’s words, “Alcoholic parents, girls who are devalued, living as black or LGBTQ in this country, these add up to revolutionaries.” Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Sheila sought to light the path for future generations of activists in the hope of reducing their pain and increasing their successes. Without the inner story, Sheila states, “students and future activists cannot understand how easy it was to victimize activists, both inside and outside the Movement. The culture of power is pervasive....It is vital that future activists be sophisticated about situations they will undoubtedly face.”

Last June, I was able to visit Sheila in New York days before her death. Her last words to me, “Come back, come back,” have settled in my heart as an invitation which I now extend to you. Come back, come back to your story. Find the still, quiet place within. Discover the freedoms for which you need to struggle. Yoke that struggle to those who struggle for the same. Share your inner story and listen deeply to each other. You will find your authentic voice. And in doing so, you will unleash your power within the confines of your ordinary life to do the extraordinary.