

Emanu-El NEXT: Investing in our Jewish Future

We believe that Judaism guides us on our journey to be better people, create community, and repair the world. Our historic home has long been cherished as a magnificent building that symbolizes Jewish arrival and integration into our city. But the building no longer adequately serves the needs of the Emanu-El community and hinders our ability to effectively support and engage our congregation. The demands of the 21st century Jewish community—and Emanu-El's 1,800 congregant families—are quite different than those of the 300 families in the 1920s who created our current building. That's why we have embarked on an ambitious effort to revitalize and reimagine our home to meet the expanding needs of our current members and those of generations to come.

Donor Spotlight: Leela de Souza and Peter Bransten

How does the son of a pioneering San Francisco Jewish family meet and marry a woman raised in Chicago by a Jewish mother with Eastern European ancestry, and a Catholic father from India? This remarkable *shidduch* was made by Peter's first cousin, Lisa Bransten, in 2004. Leela and Peter knew soon after their first date that they could build a loving partnership rooted in shared values, common goals, a firm commitment to family, and Temple Emanu-El. They were married at the Temple and it became an important constant in their family life as they raised their daughter Arielle. She attended preschool and Hebrew school at the Temple, and celebrated her Bat Mitzvah in 2019 under the guidance of Rabbi Jonathan Singer.

But let's start at the beginning. In 1850, Joseph Brandenstein, Peter's great-great-grandfather, emigrated to the United States from Germany during the Gold Rush, determined to build a new life and a family amidst the promise of America. Joseph was one of the founders of Temple Emanu-El and served on the Board of Directors. He was the third President of Mt. Zion Hospital and a member of the board of the Pacific Hebrew Orphan Asylum, which eventually became Jewish Family and Children's Services. With his large family—11 children—Joseph participated in the business, political, and arts communities of San Francisco and was proud of his Jewish heritage. He thrived in the City by the Bay and devoted much of his life to philanthropic causes. Three of Joseph's sons founded the MJB Company, which they built into a major coffee company in the United States.

Peter's grandfather, Joseph M. Bransten, who served as President and Chairman of MJB, amassed an important collection of rare books about coffee and tea, which he donated to the Bancroft Library at U.C. Berkeley. When he died in 1980, Rabbi Joseph Asher spoke of his limitless pride in his family and his mastery of the "Art of Living." Peter's late father, John, was also Chairman of MJB, a former President of the Board of the Berkeley Art Museum, and a trustee of SFMOMA. He went on to become a passionate collector of contemporary art and developed a deep appreciation for Irish poetry. John's funeral, like his father's, was held in the main sanctuary at Temple Emanu-El. Peter's mother, Rena Bransten, is the founder of one of San Francisco's most prominent art galleries. She was also a founding board member of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and continues to be a vital figure in the San Francisco arts scene.

Peter grew up within walking distance of the Temple, attended Town School, Lowell High School, and U.C. Berkeley. He is now an attorney at the Los Angeles-based firm Glaser Weil. He inherited his family's passion for the arts, and over the course of his annual trips to India with Leela and Arielle, he developed a keen interest in collecting contemporary Indian art. Reflecting on his childhood in San Francisco, Peter relates that his family identified as Jews but did not practice Jewish rituals and rarely attended services or events at Temple Emanu-El. What did anchor his experience of Jewish life, however, was a community of like-minded people with a shared sense of values, humor, and empathy.

Leela's journey as a Jew was strongly influenced by her maternal grandmother, Augusta Tannenbaum, the principal of a Hebrew school in Chicago. Growing up in a conservative congregation, Leela went to Hebrew school three times a week and had her first of two Bat Mitzvahs at Anshe Emet Synagogue. While she strongly identified

as Jewish, she didn't really feel a deep connection to Judaism. Leela attributes this disconnect to being instructed to read, write, and pray in Hebrew without understanding the meaning of what she was learning. In addition, the clergy in Leela's Chicago synagogue was dominated by men, which prompted her to question the lack of leadership roles for women in Jewish communities.

After retiring from her career as a principal contemporary ballet dancer, Leela attended the University of Chicago and moved to the Bay Area to earn her MBA at Stanford University. Upon graduation, she joined the San Francisco office of McKinsey & Company, as a management consultant, where she met long-time congregant Jennifer Futernick. In 1996, Jennifer invited Leela to join her for High Holy Days. To this day Leela remembers her first service in the main sanctuary: the stunning architecture of the sanctuary, Rabbi Helen Cohn's inspirational sermon on choosing one's unique path in life—professionally and religiously—and Cantor Roslyn Barak's transcendent rendition of *Kol Nidre*. Particularly meaningful was the fact that much of the service was in English. Almost instantly, Leela knew she'd found the Jewish home she'd been looking for, with two women clergy leading more than 500 congregants that night in song and prayer—and also feeling intellectually challenged by the many questions posed throughout the service. She began attending Shabbat services every Friday evening, became a member of the Temple, joined several committees, and had an adult Bat Mitzvah guided by Cantor Barak. This second time around Leela had the desire to more fully embrace the richness of her Jewish heritage and its traditions. Today her professional journey is guided by the principle of *tikkun olam*. As Chief Development & Marketing Officer for College Track for the past ten years, Leela is dedicated to increasing access to higher education for students from low-income communities.

Falling in love with Peter, whose family is connected to the history of Temple Emanu-El, and being married by Rabbi Cohn and Cantor Barak in Martin Meyer sanctuary gave Leela the opportunity to further anchor her sense of a "home" in San Francisco. After nearly twenty years of marriage, Leela and Peter are deeply appreciative of the kindness and guidance they have received from the Temple's clergy as well as other congregants. And it has been a joy for them to share their relationship to Judaism with Arielle, a sixth-generation San Franciscan, who now attends the Temple's 11th-grade Youth & Family Education program.



From generation-to-generation, Leela and Peter are committed to being part of the movement to ensure that Temple Emanu-El thrives through the 21st-century and beyond. They strongly believe that, long-term, our building must be a place that allows the Temple to grow its membership by being a space that brings Jews, young and old alike, together in new and inspiring ways that reflect the needs of our community. That is why they have pledged to the Emanu-El NEXT campaign. "We believe in the importance of sustaining Jewish life in the Bay Area so that generations to come are proud to be Jewish, actively participate in Jewish life, and abide by the hopeful principle of *tikkun olam*. For that is what Temple Emanu-El will forever foster in its congregation."

Please visit our website, next.emanuelsf.org to learn more. Or, if you would like to make a commitment to Emanu-El NEXT, please contact Julie Weinberg, Director of Development, at jweinberg@emanuelsf.org or 415-750-7557.