

MINYAN

Interviews with congregants from B'nai Abraham Synagogue, Butler, PA

Larry Berg and Philip Terman

Preface

The concept of interviewing a sample of B'nai Abraham congregation members began as I was interviewing my sister-in-law about her mother's Holocaust stories. We spoke over Zoom, and I transcribed the stories she shared about her mother; it wasn't long before I—a poet, after all—experimented with breaking them into lines. The accumulation of my sister-in-law's stories became a poetic odyssey of her mother's life, before, during, and after the Holocaust. The project was realized in the publication of a book *I am a Jew: A Holocaust Memoir*.

That project birthed the thought: the congregation of our beloved synagogue in Butler, Pennsylvania is—like so many religious institutions—diminishing. In fact, we are the only synagogue in Western Pennsylvania between Erie and Pittsburgh. While we are extraordinarily fortunate to still have an active group of devoted congregants (no doubt in part due to the energies of our spiritual leader and cantor, Micael Gray-Schaffer), we understand that, like so many religious institutions, we may not have much time left. With that possibility in mind, perhaps by listening to and recording and —transcribing our fellow congregants' stories into poems—might be a way of preserving their memories of the synagogue and their own Jewish journeys.

Unlike the book with my sister-in-law, however, this particular project had a special—and blessed—kudo: one of our congregants is a famous interviewer: Larry Berg, founder of a premier Butler radio station and life-long radio personality. By his own estimation, he has interviewed over 40,000 subjects, including none other than the likes of Paul McCartney and Elvis Presley. Naturally, I approached him with this crazy idea, and, always up for a challenge, he accepted. And so Larry and I conducted nine interviews (two included two subjects) with our fellow-congregants. Larry asked the questions; the interviews were recorded on Zoom, and I transcribed the responses—into poetry, sometimes re-arranging the order for purposes of narrative construction.

Why poetry? Poetry began originally and remains fundamentally an oral art; early poets, like the Greek poet Sappho, composed their poems accompanied by a stringed instrument, a lyre. Early dramas—for example, Shakespeare's, consisted of much verse. Poetry is closer to song, the human voice—the stresses, the pauses, the exclamations, the tones. Breaks in lines and stanzas direct the reader to pay closer attention. In poetry, as in music, the space around the words or the notes are as important as the words themselves. Always the intention was to capture the congregant's voice, reflecting the substance of their responses. We started off with the idea of asking each about their connection/relationship to B'nai Abraham but, of course, with the Jewish joke of “three Jews, four synagogues” in mind, each congregant has their own stories to tell—their unique backgrounds, their singular journeys, their meditations on their beliefs. In short, their “Jewishness.” And that, we realized, is perhaps the main point of this collection: the singularity, the uniqueness, of each congregant's journeys, yet they all congregate—to prayer, to share life events—to the same place: B'nai Abraham.

We discovered the uniqueness of our congregation; that B'nai Abraham, in the words of Walt Whitman, “contains multitudes.” And yet, we are, as our most fundamental prayer reminds us, “one.” As we know, in the Jewish tradition, we cannot hold a service until there are ten adult Jewish congregants. This collection includes 11, and so: a minyan.

We hope you enjoy the service.

Philip Terman

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Part One: Before Opera Winfrey

Jack of All Trades

My father was a Jack of all trades,
and a master of nothing.

He was well-versed in a lot of things:

he did mechanics, he did security
work, he did all sorts of odds and
ends jobs.

But the funny thing about my father
is that he was illiterate.

I can remember watching my mother fill out
his applications because he didn't know how
to read or write.

Odd One Out

I was the odd one out in our family.
I often felt that I was strangely different from all of them.

There were three of us:
I had an older brother
and a younger sister.

I was the proverbial middle child.

I was happy in my own mind but
the environment I grew up in
wasn't always that healthy.

My father suffered from a great deal of anger.
My growing up wasn't exactly kosher.

There was abuse—

there was a lot of emotional abuse,
there was a lot of physical abuse,
abuse directed towards me
more than my brother and my sister,

though I do remember a time
when my dad beat the crap out
of my little sister
and my brother and I both wanted to run away because
we just couldn't take it.

I don't why his anger was focused on me.

I asked a lot of our relatives to see what they saw, both
sides of the family told me, so it wasn't partial— they
said he picked on me an awful lot.

There was something about me they just didn't quite understand or like...I learned much later on that I was probably suffering from bipolar disorder when I was a child and my parents couldn't understand how to deal with a child who had special needs.

My Mother's Life Story

My mother was very passive about my father's anger, and I understand why.

She told me her life story, strangely enough, when I was—12.

Oh my...the things that happened to her were horrible.

My grandfather abused all the kids— my mother in particular—

she was molested—

God bless my grandfather's soul— but she was molested by him.

She was eventually taken out of the home, and she had to live with my great-grandmother and she dealt with some serious severe abuse —

that part I won't get too much into— because it's really really sad.

Before Oprah Winfrey

And so when my father became abusive, physically,
my mother kind of stepped back—

Only one time I do remember when my father
was beating the crap out of me— literally
throwing me against the wall— I must have been
only six or seven years old— she actually stepped
in and said:

“Paul, that’s *enough*. *Stop* it.”

It was times before Oprah Winfrey
and mass psychology—

they didn’t know how to deal with a child
who was overly sensitive and had
dramatic mood swings.

They weren’t prepared to deal with a special child.

I sort of give them a pass on that.

Blaming Myself

My mother had similar mood swings.

And I found out later that a bipolar condition tends to be genetic and as I look at my own life, and some of my history, and some of my mom's behavior,

I see a lot of similarities. *A lot* of similarities.

And then I found out my grandmother—my mother's mother— had a form of schizophrenia as well.

Often—often I felt it was *my* fault.

I blamed myself all the time—

if I was a better kid...

or if I just behaved better...

or ...I don[t know...be more lovable—

I was always blaming myself for their anger.

In School, I Kept a Lot to Myself

I wasn't good in school at first.
I struggled.
I had a learning disabilities.
Apparently, I had dyslexia when I was a child.

Thanks to my first-grade teacher—

she caught it, early on, which was really remarkable for the 1970's— she caught that I was dyslexic.

All I remember was in first grade where I had to go to classes after school:

I had to bounce on a trampoline, and read the signs that said:

bounce, bounce, sit, stop... and that's all I remember— apparently, I was dyslexic, early on— but it was caught.

I was too afraid to make friends.
I was often bullied:

I was very skinny,
I was awkward,
I didn't quite know how to relate to people.

I just got picked on a lot, I just got beat up *a lot*.

I kept to myself, especially around my Jr. High years.

You would usually find me in the school quad— reading a book...

Reading Was My Real Passion

...I got that thanks to my mother.

My mother was an avid reader— my mom was a really smart woman— I'll give her that credit—she was very smart.

She would devour books like it was nobody's business...

I read fiction— that's where I got hooked on Stephen King.

I remember in Study Hall I was reading *Salem's Lot*— I got really hooked on him. I loved the way he told stories— they scared me and kind of got me excited,

and took me out of the world that I was in.

My Grandpap Ross and Grandma Shwan

Both of them were my refuge.
I loved going to Grandpap Ross' house;

Grandpap was always funny,
always loving, always caring.

In fact, when I first was admitted to a psychiatric unit, It
was him that really came to be my advocate.

Grandpap Ross was the coolest grandpa anybody could ever have because
he was a lot of fun.
And he made sure he had a lot of fun with me.

He would take us to places like Kennywood. To watch the trains...

He would sit on the porch and listen to Pirates games and
cheer on the Pirates...

The thing was is that he was funny.
He always made us laugh. One of
the things he used to do—
he knew he would get a laugh out of my brother and me—
he would make my grandmother really mad—

he'd go to a grocery store and fart— but
he'd make a big thing about it— he'd lift
his leg up and go: "here it comes!" and
he'd let it rip!

My brother and I would just fall on the floor laughing!
And my grandmother would react like: "Thomas!" We
would just laugh even harder! It was always
wonderful— he always had treats, he always made us
laugh, he always made us feel loved.

Grandpa was a hugger, he loved us, I
always felt that sense of comfort there,
that sense of safety there. There wasn't
that craziness that I felt in my own
home.
Grandpap had a way of making us feel safe and loved,

And he always had us laughing.

PART TWO: O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL

My 16th Birthday

I celebrated my 16th birthday
at Western Psychiatric Hospital.

All I had was God.

I was placed in the hospital for my 16th birthday.
And then my parents had stayed in the PA area and moved to the Petrolia area...

And from Western Psych
I went to Holy Family Institute for a little while.

This is the last time I was ever home.
I was 16,

I had another episode of depression.

I wasn't fitting in well in school— I
started cutting on myself again.
My mother completely distanced herself.

My father —he was trying to live up to what
my grandfather pushed upon him to do,

but on December 7—Pearl Harbor Day—1982
I was sent to Mayview State Hospital From
1982-84. And the reason for that is that my
parents didn't want me at home.

They left.
Mayview's hands were tied.

I was only supposed to be there for like three months.
And when it came to the three-month period the
doctor said, "well, I think he can go home and
continue with his follow up treatment"—

my parents said: *no, no no—we don't want him.*

And it left Mayview sort of in a spot.
And I was made to stay there, because my
parents didn't want me home.

My social worker would tear her hair out
because they would never visit me. They only came twice when
I was there, and that was at the *insistence* of my social worker,
Mrs. Edmonds.
They had to make my life comfortable there—

I have to give Mayview a lot of credit—
for how they handled the situation.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

Mayview gave me a lot of support.
They were tough on me, too—

they gave me a great nurse. I
remember Mrs. Treves
if she's still alive,
then God bless her.

I don't know if you know that movie:
One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest— I can
barely watch it because it's almost too
real—for me—

Mrs Treves was like Nurse Ratchet—she was tough— but
unlike Nurse Ratchett, she had a heart.

I hated her, but what I learned much later, when I did
research on so many things, I learned that Mrs.
Treves was hard on me *for a reason*.

Because she truly believed that I had a lot of
potential, and she truly believed that I was a smart
young man that could do a lot of things, so she was
very tough on me. She advocated for me to have a *job*
on the grounds at the state hospital, which was
unheard of in the adolescent unit.

She made sure that I first got a job at the greenhouse.
Then moved me to the dietary part. She advocated for
me. And not only that— they gave me *freedom* to come
and go whenever I wanted.

I could take a bus to Bridgeville,
I could walk around the
grounds like no other patient
could.

Plus: the nurses on that staff showed me so much love, and so much support and comfort, they eased me through that latter part of my adolescence.

To this day, I have so much respect for nurses because of what they did for me.

The

Breakdown

But the biggest memory—

It was the third time we were going to move back to Pennsylvania and this was in what—1981 or 82— I had a psychological breakdown at that moment—

It was really when my mental illness took hold, and I eventually ended up in a hospital— and it happened twice.

The second time it happened was after my parents had come back from Nevada.

I had gone to the psychiatric hospital the first time, before my parents came back and my mother had called me on the phone on the nurses' desk and asked:

“What the hell is wrong with you?
Why are you looking for attention?
Grow up!
Knock it off!
You're pissing us off!
Now knock it off!
And grow up and act normal!”

She didn't want to hear anything about the fact that I couldn't understand why my brain was working the way it was—

Why did I want to hurt myself?
Why did I want to cut myself?
Why did I feel suicidal?

But I couldn't explain it to her because she didn't want to hear it.

The

Orange

Well, I did get out of the hospital
but when I went to hug my mother
after they arrived at grandpa Ross's house where I was staying—
my mother pushed me away.

She didn't even say "I love you"— she
just pushed me away.

It didn't take long for me to just want to jump off the
McKeesport Bridge again.

I ended up in the hospital.

I actually had cut myself on the way to cross the bridge—
I was bleeding all over the place—

I found my way to a church
and a nun found me there. The
nun took me to a hospital.

My grandfather was called. He
came and sat with me in that
tiny little seclusion room.

I had nothing on but my underwear.

I guess that's where they needed to place me— It
was this *seclusion* room,

and my grandfather came in— he was
crying—he was really really upset,

And he was holding an orange.

The

And he gave me this orange and he said it was for me.
 And he just kept holding me and holding me And he
 kept saying:

I love you I love you I love you.

Advocate

And at the same time, he was saying in the same breath:

*I don't know what the F... is wrong with your parents— I
 have no idea—just wait 'till I get ahold of your father—*

He was so mad because my parents weren't showing any
 kind of emotion or anything at all—

In fact, my mother was asked to leave the emergency room
 because she was screaming at them, saying:

There isn't anything wrong with him!

She was making such a scene that
 they had to remove her.

But my grandfather held my hand and stayed with me
 for the longest time and when they came home he
 gave my dad the what-for because the next day my
 father actually came and visited me in the hospital.

But my mother wanted nothing to do with me.

And so my biggest memory
 with my grandpa Ross is:

The

he *always* was my advocate, he
always wanted to understand
what was happening to me,
he *never* judged me for being sick...

He wanted to know what was wrong.
And what could be done to help me.

Trying to Get Ahold of My Mother

Oh I hated myself...

What sealed that coffin when I was in the hospital I tried to get ahold of my mother who was now staying with her sister—my aunt Gene— and she answered the phone and all I ever heard was:

How dare you?

You're a rotten son!

Who do you think you are?

You should burn in hell.

And she hung up.

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”

I'll always remember that particular day.
I think that's what started my spiritual journey.

I was about 13, we were living in Las Vegas.
My parents weren't exactly practicing Catholics. The only
time you saw *them* at mass was when the church made
them offerings of something. They weren't all that
religious— I don't know why they attended sometimes.

I remember going to mass on my own,
around Christmas time, and I remember
walking to this church—

it was a few miles away—
St. Christopher's Church—I'll always remember that— it
was Advent, a few weeks before Christmas—

They played a song and a choir was singing— “O
Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”

And it was at that moment... that I knew
there was something in my life that was
greater than— that could comfort me—
that made sense out of things.

In my little mind I just felt this *overwhelming*
sense of comfort, and warmth.

And I remember starting to cry in the
pews, and I was getting embarrassed,
because the melody was just really moving
and lifting me at that moment,

and it was really in that moment that I just decided that
I wanted to be with God.

God Was God

My Homelife at that time was really really bad.

We were struggling financially, it was hard getting food on the table, my father was in constant rage— my peers at school weren't exactly friendly, and I really felt very alone.

But when I connected with that song, that melody, that feeling in that moment— I knew there was something greater. and I felt a connection of God at that moment.

God meant: *Hope. Love. Acceptance.*

That's where it really began.
my connection with God
and my reliance upon God.

It really started flowering at that point.

Because...I began thinking that the world *couldn't* love somebody like me.

I couldn't feel loved in another capacity other than *from* God.
God was an anchor that didn't change, right?

God was God.

God Was Jesus Christ

At that moment in time— because I was
being raised as a Catholic— God was
Jesus Christ.

I understood God being Jesus and
Jesus as being God—

I never really got into the intellectual concept
until much later—

actually that happened in the monastery
more than anything—

but I never really questioned it.

All I was looking for was that connection,
that love, that consistency, that
unconditional love.

I didn't have to prove myself to God
in any other way other than just:

love God and God will love me.

**PART THREE: HOLDING ONTO THOSE BOOKS A Strange
Connection**

To really understand my connection with Judaism, we have to go back to where I lived in Las Vegas in 1978 when I was about 13 years old—

my connection with the Catholic Church ran simultaneously hand in hand with my interest in Judaism.

In 1978 there was a mini-series on television. My mother insisted we watch.

There's one thing about my mother— she was not a prejudiced person. She couldn't stand any form of bigotry. She couldn't stand any form of anti-Semitism either and for some reason my mother was a student of the Holocaust and she was reading books—

I remember getting books for her and she would read them—I don't know why— but she made us watch this miniseries *Holocaust* and that was where it started—

because I couldn't understand why somebody who was Jewish

had to be shot, had to
be killed, had to be
gassed— it made *no*
sense to me.

And I felt this kind of *strange* connection
that I really can't put words to...

like an understanding like
a, uh—I don't know...
almost an ancestral
thing— I can't put words
to it.

So I went from that point forward—
after watching this miniseries— I
went to the school library, to look
up *anything* I could find on who the
Jewish people were... **The Phone
Book**

Maybe because I related to the Jews
In the movie *Holocaust*, —I often ask
myself that question— maybe I
related to the persecution
that I was seeing in that miniseries—

I thought: I *get* it, I *understand*.
Was that the connection?
I don't know. But it was a start.

And then—I had met a nice young girl—
Anat Ben Sachet was her name— she was
an exchange student from Israel— I didn't
really have any friends, but Anat was a
friend to me.

And I remember going to her house for
Hanukkah- she was explaining the menorah— and
I was fascinated by it all.
and the more I began learning from
her and of course learning from
books— I was checking out *every single*
book I could find on Jews.

There were two things
I did that were very strange:

One: I wanted to know what it was like to
be Jewish So I went to the phone book in
the greater Las Vegas area and looked up
names that were common Jewish names
and I was calling them up and asking
them what it was like to be Jewish!

How strange is that?
I kept calling *strangers*
And asking them if they were Jewish

to find out what it was like to be Jewish!

The Bar Mitzvah Crasher

The second strange thing I did
was: I *crashed* a bar mitzvah!

I found a synagogue in the
neighborhood where I lived— I
don't remember the name of it,

And I remember going into the service—
somewhat in the middle of the service

and actually I think the bar mitzvah student
was doing his Torah portion at the time—

and I didn't want to look out of place— I
noticed that all the guys were wearing tallit

and so I went to the back and got one and I
grabbed it and put it on and pretended that I
was supposed to be there
and know what was going on—

I had *no* idea what was going on—

because they're speaking in Hebrew and
I'm like:

what are they *saying*?

But I thought it was *beautiful*.

When I First Heard Hebrew

And I say to people
—when I first heard Hebrew—

it was like *music* to me—

It really was.

Kind of almost like—physically and literally— the
boy was chanting his Torah portion in Hebrew,
and I'm hearing music.

And it was something that actually *sang* for me.

And the moment I was really in it,
I was really *in* it,
I was really *experiencing* it.

I was so *in it* that I went
downstairs because they had a
little luncheon
or something down there,

and everyone was going downstairs— right?—
so I might as well go down— but of course it
was “invitation only,”

but here I am— just trying to
figure out what to do.

The Rabbi Called My Mom

And the rabbi actually comes up to me
because obviously I'm the odd one out—

who is this kid? We don't know this kid.

And so he came up to talk to me, and I got to know
this rabbi over a period of weeks, and I actually
went to visit him—

and he told me what Judaism is, I'm
getting fascinated, really interested—

long story short: I continued to want to see this rabbi.

But the rabbi got concerned.

So: guess what?

He calls my mom and he says:

“Did you know that your son wants to be a Jew?

He wants to be Jewish?”

Well, my mother kind of laughed at it,
she scoffed at it and said:

“Thanks for letting me know, Rabbi.” It
wasn't a very long phone call.

And she calls me aside and says:

“Ben, you *can't* be Jewish.
 You have to be *born* Jewish, so stop it! You were
 born *Catholic* so keep going to mass, or whatever it is
 you're doing!
 You can't be Jewish!”

Ok.
 But that didn't *stop* my fascination with it.

Questioning Catholicism

At about 18 or 19 I had stopped going to mass.
 I had moved back to Butler.
 At that point my family and I were more estranged—
 permanently.

And it was at that point
 —I never lost my interest in Judaism—

I always read books about Jews, *always* wanted to
 know more about the Jewish faith— the Jewish
 religion—
 and I thought I wanted to take that a step further,
 and that's when I met Rabbi Walter Boninger.

I was willing to learn more. It was the first
 time I thought— maybe this Catholic thing
 really isn't for me.

It was at that time I started questioning Catholicism.

Rabbi Boninger

I had moved to Butler
on my own, and had
my own place.

That's when I started questioning the
Catholic Church. Around 1984-85.
It began to make no sense to me.

And Judaism began to make more sense to me.

And so I wanted to find out more,
I stopped going to mass,
And I started going to Rabbi Boninger.

How did I meet him?

Just like I always did:
I just walked up and knocked on the door:
“Ah—*hello!* I'm *here!*
I want to learn a little bit about being Jewish!”

I think my question was:
“Can I *convert* to Judaism?”
Cause I was still wondering what my mother said—
that you have to be born into it. But I learned that
you didn't have to be.

Rabbi Boninger asked me the question:
“Why?”
“What interests you so much about Jews and Judaism?”

I probably told him everything I knew at that time...

His smile was what attracted me to him.
 He seemed very open to my questions.
 He seemed very patient with my questions.
 He didn't turn me away.
 He was genuinely interested in what I was interested in.

What was it like to be Jewish?
 That's what I wanted to know.

He gave me *books*...
 And of course you know my love for books.
 The books he gave me—

he said if you want to know anything about being Jewish—
 he gave me books and said: "here's the religious part..."

So he gave me a book called *To Be a Jew*—that's a classic text—
 I have it on my shelf now,

And he gave me a book on Jewish short stories,
 because to understand Jews, he taught me—

you have to understand the culture, too, you
 can't just understand the religion,
 you have to understand how people really *are*—

What do they eat?
 What do they read?
 What kind of stories do they tell?
 What kind of music do they listen to?

That Old Catholic Guilt

I felt that I could fit into all that but the problem with me is that I have a lot of Catholic guilt in the back of my head. Because as any Christian would tell you— especially if you're a Catholic:

*If you turn your back on Jesus Christ,
you're going to burn in hell
and God's going to reject you—*

I was hearing that from a lot of people.
I'd say: "I want to be Jewish,"
They'd say: "you're going to hell..."

At first I was a coward. As much as I loved what I was seeing and learning about Judaism, and the culture, and everything about what it means to be Jewish—
It was so beautiful to me,
and I so much *wanted* it—

but, that part of me that—
Rabbi Boninger brought this up years later—
he said:

“You’ve got to get rid of the Catholic Church in your head.” There’s an old joke:

*Jews invented guilt,
Catholics perfected it.*

And so what kept me from becoming Jewish—
because I was so comfortable and so willing to
go in that direction— the catholic guilt won
out...I said:

“I better drop this because
I don’t want to go to hell...”

And so at that point I just went on
And kept being the good Catholic boy.

Holding Onto Those Books

The break came in the monastery.

All the time with Rabbi Boninger—
I abandoned the poor man— I
still had his books—years later,
I eventually gave them back to him—

but I *beld* onto them no matter where I went
and I’d go to several different places still
holding onto those books,
because I *had* to give them back to Rabbi Boninger—

and I kept them.

**PART FOUR: THE WRESTLING MATCH The
Monastery**

Around 1990 I decided—
well I've been such a devout Catholic all my life—
I always felt, from that day I heard “Oh Come, oh Come, Immanuel,”

I felt that I was called to be in service of
God— even when I was a boy, I was hinting to
become a priest, and I thought—

well, I didn't want the responsibility of becoming a priest,
but I could be a monk, I could be a brother.

So around 1989, 1990, I began investigating locations—
I felt that I was called to be in the service of God— I
found an order—called *Servants of the Paraclete*, in Jamez
Springs, New Mexico— an order of priests and
brothers.

Initially its mission was to work
with alcoholic priests. It was
founded by Father Fitzgerald.

The monastery attracted me
because I was finally getting into recovery—

I was a year and a half into my sobriety from 1984
and up to that point I drank like a fish—

I was a fallen-down, crazy out-of-control mentally ill alcoholic—

all you have to do is know *that* to know
how crazy my life really was...

So finally I was really feeling grounded,
and I felt that calling to serve God again,
so I applied to the Order—

I went out to visit them once, they
wanted to get to know me, and
eventually I was accepted—

and so it was in early 1990 I
entered the Monastery.
And that was quite an adventure

because it wasn't what I expected—
religiously for one, but emotionally for two...
I didn't realize that this monastery also
treated pedophiles, priests got into trouble
molesting kids...

and one of these things I had to learn how to do
is I had to learn how to interact with these priests,

and some of them were also were struggling
with their orientation—

they didn't mess with kids, but they were
struggling with their orientation so if they
had that problem, or they were molesting
kids, or they were drunks,
they were put *here*, by the church—

Fire and Brimstone

My mental illness had a little to do with the abuse
and the rejection by my parents— —that had
something to do with it— that sense of
abandonment.

It also had something to do with the Catholic Church.

But it had everything to do —if you put it on a pie chart,
about 85 percent of it had to do with—

the struggle of being gay.

And I couldn't cope with it.

I knew that the Catholic Church didn't accept it—

and I was certainly told that it was a *damnable* thing
and that if I lived it or practiced it or thought
about it,

God would send down fire and brimstone.

I was going to be consumed by the wrath of God.

The Magazine Moment

How did I know I was gay?

I kind of knew when I was six years old.

I didn't know there was a *difference*—

I didn't know that there was anything wrong with it— until

I was 11.

My brother and his friend Greg
were looking at a magazine

And “oh, the boobies”— you
know how boys are.

They were looking at the magazine
and really having a fun time with it,

and my question was: “where’s the penises?” And they
looked at me funny like: “what are you, queer?”

My mother had a sense of it.

It fueled my dad’s anger more than anything.
My mother never really mentioned it, but
my father—I think he *knew*.

Am I really born that way or
was I really created that way?

I sometimes wonder:
was it part biology or environmental?

Was I sort of *made* to believe that sometimes...?

I don’t know, and it’s still a question that to this day I
still can ’t answer with any absolute certainty.
And I think it’s still gets complicated—

way too complicated for me.

A Wrestling Match

Sometimes, when I interact with
God and I have a relationship with
God—

It seems to be a wrestling match
that has never come to an end.

Back to the Monastery, With Doubts

I went to the monastery-
because I can't be Jewish,
because God's going to condemn me to hell—

so I ended up going back to the Catholic Church wholeheartedly—
I mean I was a totally devout Catholic.

And I always thought I had a vocation,
or a calling, to be a servant to God
whether it's a priest or a brother- so: I
joined the monastery, and they
accepted me.

When I got there I already
had a handful of questions
about the Catholic Church,

I had doubts about whether Jesus
was really the messiah because I
had already learned why Jews
didn't accept Jesus Christ as the
messiah in the first place:
and it made all the sense in the world to me!
And then I didn't understand: the
whole communion, and the
transubstantiation of the body and
the blood of Christ.

And I wondered: "Woah! Why are we being cannibals?"

I didn't understand *why* we were praying to people *other*
than God?
To Mary?
To Joseph?
To Jesus himself?
This doesn't make any sense!
If Jesus died on the cross, didn't he commit suicide? God's
committing suicide?
I had so many questions going *into* the Monastery—
it was already crazy enough!

And Judaism was still making a *whole* lot of sense to me at the same time.
The drama is heightening.
It's really heightening!

But it gets even worse!

The Distraction

I was in the monastery again. I thought I was
only going to be dealing with alcoholic
priests, which only made sense- I was in AA.

I had no idea I was walking into a center
that was dealing not only with pedophiles,
but also just homosexuals still struggling.

I was there for awhile—

I did really well,
 I studied really well, I
impressed the brothers,
 the Father Superiors—

I actually received the habit, very
 quickly—that's how well I was
 doing—when I put my mind to
 something, I truly excel at it—
 And I was doing ok.

So I got the habit—still with
 doubt— but ok, but then—the guys
 that were there that were struggling
 with their homosexuality began
bitting on me —

they started giving me presents—
 right in this treatment center and I
 didn't know how to deal with this,
 and I'm not saying anything, but—
 long story short— the father
 superior got wind of it.

I was actually told to stay away from
 the men now, I was too much of an
 object for them— I was a
 distraction and that made me feel
 very very bad because I was there
 for treatment and here I am—
 getting them worked up so that did
 not help.

But that also brought up
 this whole concept of:

*Oh God, I hate this gay thing—
 we're not going to go there, here
 it goes again, yes, maybe it IS a
 curse so—*

the combination when I was
 in the monastery was
 between two conflicts—

one, my sexuality and two
the disillusionment with
the Catholic Church.

The Hanukkia

And then a sign came:

Something kind of happened—
I don't believe things happen by accident.

One day a visitor came to visit.
She brought with her—a menorah.
Actually, a Hanukkia. A little brass Hanukkiah.

Nobody wanted it.
 I'm like: *I* want it!
 Because I *knew* what it was!
 It's Jewish! It's mine.
Mine!

It wasn't much longer after that I
 really decided during vespers
 that Rabbi Boninger was right,
 Judaism was right:

There really *is* only one God.

There's no intermediary, there's
 no—

Jesus couldn't possibly have died
 for all the sins in the world— It
 doesn't make any sense.

He doesn't make any sense:
None of this makes any sense.
 The *Catholic Church* doesn't make sense to me anymore.
 I can't *connect* to God like this anymore.
 I *don't* believe it!

But what I *do* believe is
 what I learned:

That there's only really *one* God.
 And there's only really *one* law.

And that's it!
 And that's all it *took*.

Once You're In, It's Hard to Get Out

But my decision to get out was the hardest
 part because it's hard to get out once you're
 in there, right?

And not only that:
 Talk about the level of embarrassment.

Sadly, I sabotaged it in a strange kind of way.
I made sure that they would get rid of me,

So I got really really drunk.
After two years of sobriety, I went
into the priest's liquor cabinet and I
here I go...

And I had gotten *so* bad, that they felt
pity upon me, and they eventually sent
me back home.

So that's a long story short.

But I was sure of one thing:
When I get back here, I was ready
to pursue Judaism again, and that's
exactly what I did.

I left Catholicism with an absolute agreement:

That I just did *not* believe in any of that
anymore. That it just made *no* sense— And
Judaism *did*.

It ended the Catholic guilt because
there's no reason to be guilty.

When something isn't true, there was no
need to feel guilty anymore.

Except for One Thing

The only thing that I didn't find perfect
is that Judaism shared the same idea
that the Catholic Church did about the
whole homosexuality thing.

But the one thing I did notice is that there are other denominations of Judaism that seemed to not have a problem with it.

And Rabbi Boninger himself— because I met with Walter when I got back this time said:

“I thought you disappeared— you never came back and where are my books? Do you still have the books?”

I said: “Yes! Here they are!” I gave him back his books!

But the one thing that Catholicism and Judaism shared was that homosexuality was damnable: *it's an abomination...*etc.

But my love for the rest of Judaism superseded *that*— and then I got to meet Rabbi Bonnier's wife, Lonnie, who told me her son Noel was gay. and Walter, having met Noel, started learning about the gay community and became much more sympathetic and empathetic and compassionate,

and it was he and Lonnie who said:

“Don't *worry* about that *stuff*.
“It's a matter of interpretation
so let's focus on this other stuff,
which is more important.”

PART FIVE: MISHPOCHA

A Severance and an Acceptance

I got a lot of support,
overwhelming feeling of
acceptance.

People were proud that I was converting.
Walter and Lonnie almost became second parents to me. And
the congregation became a whole bunch of new friends... that
I could feel comfortable around.

By the time I worked with Walter on Judaism,
My relationship with my parents had already severed.

That had severed in 1985.

I didn't handle it very well.
For many many years.
I handled it through the bottle.

I have no contact with any family whatsoever.

They all kind of left.

And it's sort of my fault.

On both of our parts, really...

For first time in my life,
I actually feel like I was accepted.
It was so much different than school, or church.

There was a whole level of
community that I never felt before
and what kept me going even stronger

was I felt that *acceptance*.

For the First Time

I felt like I was becoming a *part* of the Jewish people: the more I *learned* about the culture, the religion— there was something about it that was magical, wonderful— purposeful, everything had a rhyme and a reason—

it was different from the Catholic Church, where you have to take things on faith—*no*, there was something *practical* about Judaism.

And there was something—*tribal*, about the community. I felt more a part of— there was a strength in this group—

I would say *mishpocha* later on—something like that— something I *never* had in my life:

It was remarkably new for me... and it was what kept me there— a community.

Like you knew your fellow Jew had your back, like you could trust them, like you can tell them anything—

except for *one* thing, which I eventually did later— but I felt comfortable enough to feel that I could thrive— how I felt, and for the first time

I came to a place where I could *thrive*, where I could truly come, where I could truly feel *safe*,

Why Orthodox

To be honest—the synagogue wasn't orthodox enough for me.
I guess I only figured this out recently.

My first attachment was to the
traditional orthodox Judaism.

What I was studying and
what I was leaning to, what
I grew to appreciate, and
gravitated to— was the
traditional Judaism.

I only understand that now because
I understand conservative Judaism,
reform Judaism, reconstructionist
Judaism, humanistic Judaism— on
so many different levels.

But the *traditional* one attracted me the most.

There's something very rich and powerful, spiritual, that
makes sense of the world for me.

It makes sense of the purpose of my life for me.

The G Word

But I couldn't go to an orthodox synagogue in Pittsburgh because—guess what?

The G word. I'm gay.

Back in the day—
I would have gone to an orthodox synagogue
In a blink of an eye—because that's where I
actually truly truly feel at home.
If you're talking about religiously—yeah!
It's the thing that *sings* to me.
That's where I want to go.

But as a gay man:
No, no, you're not welcome there...

This is before the orthodox made some changes—
Baruch HaShem—

back in the day
they wouldn't call a known gay man up for an aliyah— that
was forbidden.

They've changed that now—

There's a lot of movement in orthodoxy
That's becoming much more sensitive to
the needs of the LGBTQ community—
who are getting a lot of aliyahs now.

It's allowed me to be more comfortable in
that one aspect of orthodoxy.

As I've learned more about biblical exegesis
and how Jews have learned over the years to interpret Torah,
I've come to my own conclusion
About Leviticus 18 and 22 and
my conclusion is this:

It *assumes* something.

It assumes that the audience is *already* heterosexual:
Thou shalt not lie a man as with a woman.
You're assuming that this is speaking to a heterosexual man—

I've reduced it down to this:

Don't do what does not come natural to you.

If people are literally born this way,
then why would God sentence them to
such a level of hell?

To me, it's assuming that this law is
specifically for heterosexual men.
It does not apply to gay men.

Makes all the sense in the world.

The 70 Faces

I've just come to terms
with the fact that these are just human beings
trying to figure something out.

And what I love about Judaism is the fact that
is who we are.
We wrestle.

That's where our name comes from: we
wrestle with God.

I choose orthodoxy because
I love the tradition.

I also choose orthodoxy because—
Hello!

I want to say this to my fellow orthodox Jews:

You need to continue wrestling and
not just settling.

You need to stop stop only focusing
so much on what the rabbis have thought about in the past—

you should draw upon that and
continue wrestling with it.

My idea—as I just mentioned with Leviticus 18 and 22—
is just another part of my wrestling with the Torah.

There's room—there are no *absolutes* other
than *the absolute one God*.

But when there's Torah interpretation—
there're 70 faces, as they say— there are
many ways to look at it.

And you don't have to sacrifice tradition for
that wrestling.

You can turn it over and over and over.
That's how I've sort of resolved it.

My Wrestling

I don't know if I've *completely* resolved that issue,
because I think what's happened over the years—

when one *internalizes*
homophobia, it does become a
part of you and there *are* times
when I *do* regress.

There are times when I wonder: "am I wrong?"

But it's almost on the same lines as when
I work through my mental illness:

"Well, Ben, it's just a part of who you are.
It's a part of your make up."

It's uncomfortable, but it's something I
have to learn to live with.

Am I ever going to get rid of my mental illness?
No.

Am I ever going to get rid of my homophobia completely?
Heck no.
It's become too much a part of me.

But the thing I'm doing differently
is that I'm allowing *religion*— the
thing that once *hurt* me— To now
heal me.

If that makes any sense.

The Rabbi I Want to Be

The Rabbiniacs I want to be in
is more of a chaplaincy.

Because I like working with people one on one—
being involved with others who need a sense of
direction.

It's more of an AA kind of thing—

the more I help someone else,
the more I help myself...

And the more I help wrestle the angel with you,
helps me to grow spiritually as well.

So while you're wrestling with an angel,
I'm wrestling with the same angel you are,

and at the same time we're helping one another.

That's the kind of rabbi I'd like to be.

Mishpocha

I've seen this community growing in
so many different ways
and change in so many different ways,

But something that's been consistent here—
and has never changed— is that it's been a
mishpocha —it truly *is* a family.

The reason I say that is: sometimes
I get mad
at things that are happening around here—

As my friend Karen pointed out:
"You wouldn't be mad if you didn't love them.
You wouldn't be mad if you didn't care."

And it dawned on me—

We get mad at the people we love. We get mad
at the people who are our family— because we
feel safe to get mad at them.

And it helped me to understand
there is one thing that has *never* changed in this congregation—
it is that level of care and concern and compassion:

The sense of *mishpocha*, of family.

One of the reasons why this synagogue is the
last one standing in this part of the rust belt:
it's that sense of *being* family.

And that has not stopped since
the day I knocked on Rabbi
Walter Boninger's door.

We truly live *as Jews*—

You get two Jews in a room
you get three opinions— that's
who we are.

But we're *still* family.

Coda

Larry Berg:

“Let's hope that: 10 years, 50 years,
100 years from now people watching
and reading this will be inspired and
say to themselves:

I wish we had that now.”

Ben:

From your lips to God's ears.

Hunter Bell: Pursuing Justice

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One: Against the Tide

What Debating Looks Like

I was raised sort of under the Christian faith. My parents would occasionally drag us to a Presbyterian Church mostly when they felt bad because we weren't going to church because neither one of my parents were very religious.

My parents sort of brushed the topic of religion aside. They didn't take us to church all that often. They come from the opposite sides of the political spectrum: My father being very conservative, my mother being more liberal.

They had conflicting views about Christian faith: my mother was raised Catholic; she didn't like the way the Catholic Church was run; and my father, who was raised Methodist, didn't like the propagation of money—constantly shoveling money towards these different things

but not being financially smart with the money they were receiving.

Both of them had negative views to begin with, so if one of their kids had a negative view about religion they didn't really acknowledge it that much.

I did have a grandmother who I was very fond of who was half Roman Catholic and when I would spend weekends with her she would take me to Saturday night mass.

So from a young age on---- I was introduced to what debating looks like, what actually asking questions looks like.

For me, asking questions and having conversations with people was kind of a normal thing.

Questions About the Inner Workings of It All

I believed God existed but I didn't understand the way Christianity depicts God.

It was always: "you need to do these things or you will be sent to hell for your actions."

And: "God loves you but God will punish you if you do XY or Z."

And the thing that confused me was the concept of Jesus being the savior, because in my eyes: how could God could have a son if God doesn't have a physical body?

And how is this man the savior when the world is still in such a turmoil as it is?

I was incredibly young when I came to these conclusions.

The first time I ran into trouble I was 9 years old!
I would go to Sunday school teachings
and repeatedly get my speaking privileges taken away

because I would ask these kinds of questions
about the inner workings of it all.

For example, I asked about evolution and how that fits.
And they were—like, “well, we just don’t talk about it.”

And I would ask: “why not?”
And then they would go: “well, ‘cause we don’t.”

And I would argue: “Is the earth round?”
And they would say: “Yes, why?”

And I would say: “Well, in the book of Isaiah it describes the earth as a round disk,
so by that logic you might say the earth was flat.”

And from a young age on,
I was very questioning about it

and really didn’t feel like it belonged to me. It
didn’t make sense in my mind--

how the Old Testament and the New Testament contradicted
themselves so much.

What I Wanted Religion to Be

I wanted religion to be a world where
God created our world,
everything that was there,

but I did not like the fear aspects— the
fire and brimstone aspects of religion.

I wanted it to be a religion where— not
so much: “do these things
or else you’ll suffer after you die.”

But rather: “do these things
because God loves you and wants you to live a good life.” **Against the Tide**

I had a lot of very unpopular opinions,
according to my peers.

A lot of that also had to do with me being a
transperson and a queer person in general so the
difference in religious beliefs added to what was
already there.

I can't tell you how many times in Middle School I
would have notes written to me:

“you'll burn in hell because you're a gay person”—

And I would sit there and say:

“If the essence of religion is about loving people,
how can they be so hateful?”

First Glimmerings

I realized something wasn't quite right--
when I started going through puberty
when I was 10 or 12 years old, because
I lived my life—

my parents were pretty good— there were no
chores for “boys” and “girls” no tasks for
“boys” and no tasks for “girls.” Everybody had
to help and do the same things.

And I played a lot of sports like baseball and flag football—
things like that—as a kid, it wasn't till my body started changing
when I thought: *well, this doesn't feel right at all,*

and it wasn't until I was 14 when I learned what
the word “transgender” meant.

Struggling

It was not easy when I was younger.

When I learned what the word “transgender” meant. I spent approximately five years trying to convince myself otherwise. I realized I was still attracted to men and I kept thinking well you can’t be a transman and *also* be gay.

I would use that logic—
and I would say: “well, sometimes I like wearing nail polish, so, therefore I’m still a girl”—

I was so afraid of potentially losing my family and friends that I continued for five years to be miserable trying to convince myself I was a girl when *really* I knew for a very long time that I was a man trapped inside of a woman’s body.

Unfortunately, I had hair that went past my waist at one point— I looked very different.

Yes, I was experiencing a lot of mental turmoil, particularly age 14 into 15 and 16.

I had confided in a few friends by the time I was 17 about the issue, so they at least knew about it even though I was still very much closeted—

They knew what was going on, so they could give any kind of support when they thought they could.

I Just Kind of Went for It

I kept working myself up to it and
it was finally when I was going to
be entering college--

I'll be away from my very conservative hometown,
I'll be away from my more conservative family members— I
can finally start to live a bit more as I wished to.

Unfortunately, that was the year of the
Pandemic and I was kept home and doing online
schooling.

But halfway through that year-- April
of 2021-- is when I finally
just came out to my parents

and just kind of went for it.

I'm Talking to You About This Is Because I Love You

My mother was not shy about it at all— she went through a whole cycle of asking:

Was it because I didn't love you enough?

And I would say: “No, the whole reason I'm talking to you about this is *because* I love you.”

My parents are still reluctant to use my name even though it has been legally changed— it's a constant kind of bickering back and forth.

The difference is— my family had moved to another region in the country-- it's not like I have to constantly interact with them anymore.

I recognize that while you have known me as *Hunter* for as long as you've known me, my parents have known me by a different name for about 19 years.

It's been getting better,
and the most I can do is
just be *patient* with them.

Two: Conversion

Why Judaism?

I had read in quite a few different religions:
Hinduism and Buddhism and Paganism and Islam-- I
was like—no, none of these really fit me, either—

It wasn't until 9th grade when I had a World Cultures class.
There was a unit on World Religions.

For an assignment we had to do research
on a religion not our own and do a
report on it and I thought:

Well, I never learned about Judaism.
I might as well read up on that—

I went into the library and picked up some books on Jewish ethics,
Jewish beliefs, Jewish holidays, Jewish customs— and it clicked in
my head,

and I thought: *oh wait, this makes a lot more sense.*

For one it reinforced my belief in one God, one creator. Second, the
concept of God came from a more loving approach, a loving but
powerful creator more than the fire and brimstone aspect.

And then it was reading different beliefs of the Jewish
people in general and I learned about the humanitarian
aspects of the religion.

I Didn't Know Any Jews

Oh--I know people who would say:
“Yes, I had Jewish ancestry, but I'm not
practicing Judaism, my other half is
Christian and we celebrate the Christian
holidays.”

Because there were no actual Jewish people
living around me at the time— I had gone
online
And started talking with a couple of
rabbis and others who were openly Jewish
And I started to get a feel for that.

They talked about how it's such a loving community
and how community is so important and family is
so important
and how it is also—it's not just a religion; it's also a culture,

which is why conversion is such a big thing.

A Sense of Understanding

One thing my education talked about-- I learned a lot about what anti-Semitism was and where it came from.

I remember hearing people who had anti-Semitic views and I was curious as to: why is it that there? What is the meaning for that?

So I would look into that as well.
If I wanted to become Jewish,
I had to realize there was hatred for Jewish people by other people in the world.
As far as I can tell it comes from a senseless hatred.

I connected with Jews because of their oppression, but I am from a younger generation.
If you were gay before the 2000s, you had a lot higher chance of being assaulted.
I was never physically assaulted or anything like that for who I was—

However, I received borderline death threats from other students for something that was beyond my control.

So I did feel a sense of
 understanding because I had already
 by that point been heavily threatened
 for just who I was.

I didn't see becoming Jewish as 'asking for more trouble.'

The way I saw it was: any potential trouble
 I could have gotten into didn't come close
 to what it was doing for me spiritually to
 continue to learn.

A Jewish Soul

The first thing I did on my immersion into Judaism was
 to contact Rodolf Shalom synagogue in Pittsburgh.
 I told them about my interest in converting.
 The secretary asked: "where are you from again?"

I said, "Oh, I live in Slippery Rock."

And she said "Please don't interpret this as if we don't want you here.
 But there is a synagogue in Butler that's a very friendly community
 And a smaller community that's wonderful.
 Why don't you go up there and talk to them?"

So I contacted Cantor Michal and met her and
 from then on I began learning even more.

When I told Cantor Michal about my story-- and finally
 having a religion that had significance to me,
 she smiled at me and said "you sound like you have a Jewish soul."

And it was mostly about my constant questions.

She sent me home with five different books that I still have to this day and from then on, after that first impression, I became so inspired to continue learning.

Going Forward

There was no question about going forward; the Cantor didn't see much question about it either.

She sent me home and would say:
"Here are five different chapters of Jewish Literacy by Telushkin. Pick one of these five and come back and let me know what you think."

I ended up reading eight chapters, because once I started reading-- I would have to make myself stop.

I started reading in bed at 8:30 at night and then it was 2 in the morning.

There were dots connecting all of the time for me. I would sit there and think, "well this is how I've seen things to begin with."

It was like the concept hasn't been introduced to me until now.
It was almost like having déjà vu with myself.

I've become much more an understanding
and a more compassionate person since
looking into Judaism.

I felt my own spiritual needs were being met and looking
at the world through a Jewish lens is very different from
looking at the world through the lens of a loosely
Christian child.

It's all about being compassionate to people and
pursuing justice in the world.

The Orthodox Perspective: Examples of Acceptance

I learned that ultra-orthodox are slow to
acceptance of gay and transpeople.

At first it took me back by surprise a little bit because
the Jewish people I talked to were: reform,
conservative, reconstructionists, modern orthodox.

When I first learned about it my heart
filled with a twinge of sadness.

However, because of where I grew up,
it was not an unfamiliar feeling.

I started looking into why the orthodox were a bit slower to
accept things and when I talked with an orthodox rabbi the way
he explained it was the orthodox want to insure that everyone is

living their lives as authentically Jewish as possible so they cannot accept something until they can conclude that it is authentically Jewish.

But I have seen some things where they have started to make slow progress. In Israel there was a staff member hired at Yeshiva who is a transman.

Slowly, I'm seeing examples of acceptance.

A Lifetime of Learning

I have chosen more of the conservative route, closer in some aspects to modern orthodox—

Generally, I would keep kosher, and to observe the sabbath as best as I can and try to pray once a day.

I'm not sure if right now the orthodox is best for me. My partner is not Jewish— they don't follow any religion and, at least for the orthodox, that's definitely one thing that's not allowed.

I don't think we're ever *done* learning in our lives. There's always room to learn, there's always room to grow, there's always room to improve

on things there's always room to re-look at things.

Currently I'm in training under Cantor Michal for my Bar Mitzvah, which will be in May of 2023, But after that—I know I have a whole lifetime of learning.

Life will always change as we go along.

One thing I expressed to Cantor Michal was I would like go through some kind of religious training to become an educator for future generations of Jewish people.

My dream would be to still have my secular job but then to also be a Hebrew school teacher.

And that will allow me to learn for the rest of my life.

The Beit Din

The Beit Din was a wonderful experience.

There was Rabbi Sharon Henry of Rodof Shalom And Rabbi David Felman of Temple Sinai in Pittsburgh to join Cantor Michal -- we met in Rodolf Shalom in the rabbinical library.

They would ask me some questions:

How have I been living my life as a Jewish person?

Have I been reaching out as a Jewish person?

In what way have I changed my life after being Jewish?

In what ways have I observed my religion?

And then they asked me to step outside
so they could deliberate.
And in a matter of less than three minutes
they called me in and said:

“Alright. You’re becoming a Jew today.
Get ready and go to the mikvah.”

It was a exhilarating feeling.

I had a nervousness coming up to it because I tend to
be a little more anxious when it comes to being
interviewed and things like that.

I was thinking:
“have I learned enough?”
“Have I done enough to be able to call myself Jewish?”

And when I finally immersed myself in the mikvah,,
and Rabbi Felman shouted: “mazel tov!”—

That’s when I had this very euphoric feeling.

Exhilaration

Now I felt that being Jewish was more official.
I felt Jewish beforehand—but it was more of
an exhilarating feeling because now I don’t
have to give a long answer!

I wear a yarmulke all the time because
for me it’s spiritually fulfilling as far
as keeping myself humble and being
a good person and as a reminder of
my faith.

People would look at me and say:

“Oh are you Jewish?” and I would have to give this long explanation and say “Well, I’m studying, I’m converting to Judaism, but not quite yet!”

I Was Supposed to Be Jewish in the World

My non-Jewish past is more like a memory, because I had been immersing myself in Judaism for quite some time now.

I’ve been keeping kosher for over a year.
I’ve been going to services for over a year.

I don’t even remember what pork and things like that taste like, I don’t remember Christian services anymore.

I still look fondly on some old memories. I did sometimes enjoy when my grandmother would take me to Saturday night mass, because that was just spending time with my grandmother.

However, it doesn't quite compare to how Judaism has felt for me, and being Jewish.

I've always connected to many aspects of Jewishness,

for example:
pursuing justice,
trying to be compassionate to people,
and always being inquisitive in finding your voice in the world—

those were things I was trying to do before I knew that I was supposed to be Jewish in this world.

I look back and think:
“Well it hasn't really been that long, It's been a year,”

But at the same time,
I was just so immersed in it,
And always interested in learning,
And continuing to practice my own spiritual needs that for me, even though I know it's only been a year, It feels like it's been so much *longer* than that.

This Is Really Me, Even More So

The thing that will cement it more for me that *yes, I'm Jewish*, is when I have my bar mitzvah.

Because that is a step: this is really me, sealing myself forever, even more so, with the Jewish faith,

as someone who has gone through the steps

to educate themselves on their faith and
can potentially lead services and
understand how to read Torah and to
really step up into what is quite literary a
coming of age for most Jewish children.

Justice, Justice, You Should Pursue

I'll be going to law school.

It's very coincidental. It matches up pretty nicely!

I've been interested in making the world as
better a place as I could.

And for me, why not go to Law school?

Then I could be part of those people who are making those changes in the world today.

I chuckled to myself when I saw the “justice, justice you should pursue.” All the little puzzle pieces are really fitting.

I’m a pre-law student who’s becoming Jewish.

A lot of what I want to do is work with worker’s unions, to hold companies accountable and make sure that HR policies are being non-discriminatory.

My Bar Mitzvah

The Cantor expressed as early as January of 2021 that I was almost there,

and it was about in April of 2021 we talked about scheduling a date.

When spring semester came up I was no longer able to meet with her as often as I did so I continued to study in my time in-between classes.

And “in April,” she said, “let’s set a date.”

So we did: on
May 6, 2023—

I officially become a Jew.

ROBERTA GALLAGHER:**WALKING FORWARD****Table of Contents**

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A Cog in the Great Machine (Joseph Hurwitz)

I have not given to humanity anything outstanding,
yet I was and still am a cog in the great machine
that rotates and is called the Universe.

Father Was a Hebrew Teacher (Joseph Hurwitz)

I was born in Evie, Vilna, Lithuania in Russia.

Father was a Hebrew teacher by profession. He conducted a school (cheder) of his own, where he taught children of the middle grades.

He taught in Uman, Kiev, in the Ukraine. His earnings were quite meager. Mother had to bake bread and spin flax in order to support the family.

Father was in fact saving money So the family could move to Man. We traveled from Evie by horse and wagon Then.a steamer. I remember The first time I was embraced by my father.

*

The Revolutionary Movement

In Vilna I lived among workers and mingling with some revolutionary elements, I was in sympathy within the revolutionary movement. I helped to spread illegal leaflets.

I conducted classes where I enlighten working men and women of the issues of the time. I taught them about political economy, about organization, and about unions.

This work involved great risk. Luck was with me and I was never apprehended. It may have been my student uniform that distracted attention.

I was a valuable asset to the movement. I preached revolution. In Vilna I helped a good many illiterates gain education.

*

I, Too, Wanted to Be a Teacher

There was a prominent school
Of higher education called "The Teacher's School."
This school was exclusively for Jewish students.
No tuition, the student was fed, clothed, And
prepared for a teacher's career.

Knowing it was hard for my brother to support me, I
gave lessons to working men and working girls
who were anxious to become literate.

I taught them the Russian and Yiddish language.

Yes, there was some suffering in leading such a life,
depending on a livelihood from prospective students.
Some months there wasn't enough income to keep
body and soul together, but I was not alone in such
conditions at that time.

I graduated from the preparatory school, but
my ambitions for a teaching career ended.

I needed a birth certificate to prove my age, But I didn't
have one. My parents either neglected to register me at
my birth, or not registering me would save me from
military service.

I didn't have the money to bribe officials.

My hopes to become a student at the Institute were lost.
My only hope was the New World, the United States.

I left Vilna in August 1903 to join my brothers in the United States of America.

My Immigrant Story

1) My American Accent

In New You I got a job at a cigar factory,
Making cigarettes wrapped in tobacco instead of paper.
I received the sum of \$3.00 per week, the first cash I
earned in the United States. I moved up top piece
work, earning \$6.00 per week.

But the cigar factory did not agree with me, The
tobacco dust did not o me any good.

I attended night school and learned English.
Everyone who listened to my use of words admitted
my accent was so American.

On February 12 our school celebrated
Lincoln's birthday and I was chosen to
recite a poem. I chose Longfellow's
"The Village Blacksmith."
Teachers from other classes complimented me, as
good as any American-born school child.

2) How I Came to Butler, Pennsylvania (Joseph Hurwtiz)

My brother Charles lived in Butler, Pennsylvania,
He found a job with a junk dealer And nvited me
to come to Butler and I did.
It was March, 1904, and I proceeded to visit
Butler many times. In November, 1917, I
became a permanent resident of Butler.

Roberta Gallagher:

in his biography,
 My grandfather states New York was
 not an area he wished to raise his
 children, so he came to Butler,
 worked full time for his brothers,
 decided he liked the country life And
 so he brought his family to Butler,
 where his two brothers,
 Charlie and Abe Hurwitz arrived before.

3) The Junk Business

And they established junk yards,

They were both—my two uncles— in the
 junkyard business—it was lucrative , and
 they set my grandfather up with a cart and
 a horse and things to go house to house
 for items that women needed at the time,
 and it was an ok business to start out in,

4) The Goal of Our Hopes (Joseph Hurwitz)

Our first home was a three room upstairs apartment With
 a Jewish family. In May, 1918, my brother
 Had to buy a house in order o give us larger living quarters.
 We lived twenty-five year in this particular home,
 From 1918 to 1943. In this house We reached
 the goal of our hopes. We raised our three
 children That any parents could be proud of.

The Butler School Policy

Joseph Hurwitz:

Our only girl graduated as a teacher
In Slippery Rock. She obtained A
teaching position in a country school
in a nearby township.

A neighbor's girl was elected for the
vacancy even though our daughter
graduated six months before her.

When I pressed a board member for an explanation,
he admitted that our daughter's religion was against
her. The policy
was to elect only a restricted number

of Catholic and Jewish teachers
and the quota was already filled. so
our girl was elected as a teacher

We jews have a proverb:
"It is hard to be a Jew."

We hoped to make our daughter happy
by giving her a teaching career, but her
application was refused by the Butler
School Board, because we were of the
Jewish faith.

Roberta Gallagher:

My father went to college at Michigan.

Teaching in Butler was ok because he was a male.

His sister had a difficult time because she was a Jewish female. She was sent out to the boondocks of Butler But I don' ever hear him talking about any antisemitism towards him.

It surprised him that he didn't get any negative feelings.

The Science Teacher

1) Invitation From Uncle Sam (Joseph Hurwitz)

Our youngest boy graduated from the University of Michigan where he majored in biology.

He applied and was accepted as a science teacher at our Butler Junior High School.

He taught school for five years until he was drafted into our armed forces of the Second World War. His term ended on Friday and the following Monday He received his invitation from "Uncle Sam."

2). Wounded in the Battle of Anzio (Roberta Gallagher)

My father Hy was in the junk business, too—

Not originally, but because of his injury in WW II, he could no longer teach In Butler Jr. High School.

He was wounded in Anzio, and couldn't stand for long periods of time,

and so he had to give up
the love of his life, which
was teaching.

3) A Minor Accident (Joseph Hurwitz)

In his letter our son cautioned us at the start not to get alarmed— he wrote that a minor accident happened to him and his legs were injured.

The task I was confront with was not an easy one. I had to break the news to both my wife and my son's wife. I wanted my boy to come back alive to us, his parents, and to his family, even if he were to be crippled.

4) At the VA (Roberta Gallagher)

My father was wounded in Anzio and in the foot, and the best hospital was Butler, Deshon Hospital, the VA Hospital, which of course was perfect, because here it was in Butler.

He felt he as treated very well, and because he had family around he felt at home as he could.

He was married before he went into the army.

5) Embracing Our Son (Joseph Hurwitz)

One beautiful day, early in September, we were embracing our son on the lawn of the Deshon Hospital. He was on crutches, but both of his legs were intact and not a limb of his body was missing. Tears of happiness came flowing from my eyes when I watched our boy embracing his mother, his wife, and his son.

The Saturday Night Crowd

My parents lived on 2nd St in Butler in a duplex.
My mother told me the Saturday night crowd from the synagogue would go to different homes every Saturday night and the women would make jello salads.

My mother went often to the synagogue— she was raised in an orthodox home- it did take a long time for my father to go with her, he did not care to go to shul as often as she did.

Eventually he started going every week.

Once she got out of her mother's home, she was not orthodox.

The Junkyard Business in Butler

My grandfather's two brothers,
Charlie and Abe Hurwitz,
Came to Butler— not sure of the dates
At the beginning of last century,
And they established junk yards,

And my grandfather in New York
Had many different jobs, but
Being in New York, in his autobiography,
He states it was not an area
He wished to raise his children,
So he came to Butler, worked
Full time for his brothers, Decided
he liked the country life
And so he brought his family to Butler.

I'm not certain why they came to Butler—
Did the brothers have relatives or friends in this area That
brought him here originally.
Not sure why their names was Horwitz

And our name was Hurwitz, When they
all came through Ellis Island
With the same Russian name, Greavitch.

Through his biography, I think,
They were both—my two uncles—
Were in the junkyard business—it was lucrative ,
And they set my grandfather up
With a cart and a horse and things
To go house to house for items
That women needed at the time, And it was an
ok business to start out in, I guess, And I don't
know why they actually came here.

Science Teacher (2)

My father Hy was in that business, too— not
originally, but because of his injury in WW II,
he could no longer —he was a science
teacher in Butler Jr. High School, and he as
wounded in Anzio, and could no longer stand
for longer periods of time, and so he had to
give up the love of his life, which was
teaching, and he was asked to join his father's
business.

Father Went to California, Briefly, Back to Junk Business

At one time he was asked to go out to California to join my other grandfather's business a jewelry business in California, and he went because my mother wanted to be close to her family and he found he didn't really like it at all to do it for army mother, to keep her where she wanted to be but his father called and asked him to come back, because he needed more help at the junkyard, and he did.

My father went to college at Michigan.

Teaching in Butler was ok because he was a male; his sister had a difficult time because she was a Jewish female. she was sent out to the boondocks of Butler but I don' ever hear him talking about any antisemitism towards him.

It surprised him that he didn't get any negative feelings.

Father's Experience in the Army

He told us he was wounded in Anzio and in the foot, and the best hospital was Butler Deshawm Hospital, the VA Hospital, which of course was perfect, because here it was in Butler.

He felt he was treated very well, and because he had family around ne felt at home as he could.

He was married before he went into the army.

How My Parents Met

He met my mother because his older brother
Al Horwitz, had to shlep his brother into Pittsburgh,
When he would go on dates with this Lilian Blitzstein from Pittsburgh,
Finally Lillian Blitzsten decided he was going to find someone for
Hy Because he was tired of the threesome, She found my mother-
her dear friend.
They were married in Pittsburgh—I think at Temple Sinai.

The Saturday Night Crowd

They lived on 2nd St in Butler in a duplex.
She told me about the Sat night crowd
From the synagogue would go to different homes
Every Saturday night and the women would make jello salads.

My mother went often to the synagogue,
She was raise in an orthodox home-
It did take a long time for my father to go with her, He
did not care to go to shell as often as she did.
Eventually he started going ever week.

Once she got out of her mother's home,
She was not orthodox.

Those Junk Conventions!

I was their third child.
I have two older brothers.
Larry is 10 years older
And David is 5 years older,
And my parents would laugh and say:
“Every time there was a junk convention,
She got pregnant.”

That was every five years.
They must have stopped going after I was born!

My Orthodox Ancestor

My orthodox grandfather passed away when I was three,
My grandmother, who eventually moved to Peoria Indiana
Where my mother's sister and brother lived, I don't
remember her being so orthodox.

My mother would tell us stories
Of how they would tear toilet paper
Friday mornings, to get the toilet paper
Ready for Shabbos, and how would they do the cholom
To keep on the stove
And they would bake their challas every Friday
So they would be nice and fresh
And they should have two challas ready— I
do remember my grandmother—
I had many years with her—I think she passed away when I was 17,
And she did come to live with us for the last few years of her life,
But I don't remember her being so frum.

The

Jewish Boys Were More Like Brothers

We had a lot of girls and a few boys
In our class that were jewish,
And my best friends were the jewish girls
Who lived near me,
We hung around in groups—
We never thought about date jewish boys
Because they were like our brothers
And that would be terrible,

Group of Rainbows

The only thing that really comes to mind
 About what I did not like
 Was that there was a group of rainbows,
 And no jews or blacks were allowed to join rainbows,
 It was for girls-
 And they wouldn't tell us the secret code
 Of what the letters meant,
 And there were three of us that were very upset
 That we couldn't join this girls' group,— And then
 we couldn't go to the Butler Country Club
 With our friends—
 Other than that, it was okay,
 We knew there were people who didn't want jews around,
 I had a neighbor—her parents were very anti-semitic,
 Yet she was one of our gang,
 The ant-semitism was more toward the adults—

Most of us got along so well,
 But there was this one family,
 They didn't interact with any of the Jewish adults,
 Whereas many of the other non-jewish adults—
 And even the reverend minister,-

Our families got together,
 And had picnics—dinners together, But
 this couple did not.

My mother explained: It's just how it is.
 And that I did *nothing* wrong.

The

There wasn't a lot of talk
 About anti-Semitism—
 You felt it, but not to a large degree.

My parents wanted to assimilate,
 But still wanted to keep tradition alive.

Distinguished Service Award

My father was involved in almost everything *imaginable*,
 From the Elks to Triple A to B and B Bank,
 He was on the board of many organizations—
 Boy Scouts..he was a nice guy,
 He was forgiving to people,
 He was accepting of people,
 And he was in it not for himself,
 But for the greater good of Butler.

He as given the distinguished service award man of the year.

It didn't surprise me,
 Because my father was the man of every year and every day.
 He was my idol.
 I'm sure it surprised him,
 He was such a humble man, He
 didn't do anything for praise Or
 recognition.

First Exposure to Synagogue: My Teachers

I remember dancing in the social hall
With Janet Davis, who was our teacher or leader,
It was a preschool get-together on /sunday mornings,e When
everyone else was going to Sunday school.

There were probably about 100 children.

I was going through my teachers—
I remember three: Gene Krouse, Strict
but fair teacher.
One of the students—my best friend forever,
Came to school to /sunday school in culottes, And
she was told to go home.

I remember Rose Horwitz being a teacher— That
was a difficult year,
She was a very tough teacher- But
I was always a rule follower, So if
you followed the rules,
These teachers weren't so bad.

The

It was just for those who were not rule followers, And
every class has them.

And my last teacher for pre-confirmation
Was a Mr. Hirschberger,
He lived across on Muntz Avenue,
And he was the most *interesting* teacher I ever had, He taught us
about modern Judaism then about modern Judaism Then about
all these rivers and things we didn't care about.

Rabbis

Rabbi Casell bat mitzvah me.
To me he was kind and patient,
I learned one haftorah when I was at summer camp,
And when I got home from summer camp,
And my bat mitzvah was supposed to be in October,
I had to change my whole haftorah,
Because my brother couldn't make it home because of finals.
So he was very patient and he mad me a cheat sheet.

Rabbi Boninger I remember vividly
Because I started working with him
As a teacher and Walter would aggreveat me to no end,
But in the end he came along to my point of view—heunderstood,
And we got along ok.
We had our six a.m meetings on the phone
And I loved him for the fact that he accepted the non-Jewish spouses without question.

The New Synagogue

My brother Larry was the first bar mitzvah in the new synagogue.
And my mother said they had to put folding chairs up because the pews were not in yet.

Welcome Wagon

My mother was the welcome wagon lady.
An interesting time in my life!
My father and I never knew who was coming for dinner
At any one time,

Because when she made a welcome wagon call on somebody, And
they were in the midst of unpacking,
She brought them for dinner—the whole family!
I loved it! And that's when I learned to love having people at my house and entertaining.
About your mother:

Getting Along with My Mother

I think every daughter has a point in time,
When she and her mother do not get along.
I remember when David had to come home from school one weekend
Because my mother and I were having an argument
About who knows what at the time,
And he had to calm us down
But my mother and I—we became inseparable,
Once a daughter grows up
And becomes an adult,
She understands more about what her mother was doing
And why she was doing it—hopefully!— And
the night that my father was operated on For

The

his brain aneurism, in January 18, 1971, She
and I became best friends.
That's when we truly bonded,—
I was still in college,
And I realized what she had gone through all her life.
It was—I found her to be an *amazing* human being.
And I guess I didn't realize that because
She was the welcome wagon hostess,
We always had people,
I didn't think she spent as much time
As I wanted to be with her,
But she was always there
When I came home from school,
She always took me to dance classes,
But we didnt *talk*
She gave me a book on different topics She
was uncomfortable talking to me about.
So we became inseparable.

Our Jewish Home

Shabbas was shabbas.
But back in those days
We didn't have so many extra-curricular activities
To run to,
Shabbas dinner, was either chicken, brisket, or spaghetti,
We always lit the candles,
Said the bruchas, And my
parents went to shule
And I went to dance at the WYCA.

It was just something you did—y
You went to services on Saturday whether you liked it or not,
And you went to Sunday school on Sunday mornings Whether
you liked it or not.

It was just a way of life,
And we all did it.

What I Wanted to Be, What I Became

I wanted to be a speech anthropologist

I wanted to do something with children
And I applied to the colleges
Penn state would take me in their fall program But
only in elementary education.

It's become a love a love of my life, being in education.
And thanks for Penn State for the opportunity to be a teacher.

Smoking in the Boy's Room

For the first two years I went to Altoona,
And there was a school— It was
Montefeuere Elementary School
And first I got to watch the teacher for several days

I had 4th grade, and I loved it,
And I started off doing restroom duty
Here's a cute little introduction to drugs— I
took the students down to the restroom—
Boys one way, girls the other,
And the door opened to the boys's restroom And
this odor came out of the boy's restroom And
this one little boy came out and said:
“They're smoking inside there.”
So I went into the restroom and opened the door up
And I said: “There's someone coming inside here, and it's not a boy.”

And I walked in and found a joint
In a fourth grader's hand— And
I did know what a joint was,
And I took them by the hand And
took him to the principal's office But
I shook for the rest of the day.
I was so upset that this happened my first week of school.

Wisdom From My Father

All he said was:
Love what you do,
And then do it,

And you'll be fine.
As long as you love it in your heart And
this is truly what you want to do, You'll
be fine.

He was absolutely right. Absolutely.
I love what I did and do.
So I do what I love.

First Job as a Teacher and Where

I worked at YWCA, tiny tots and pre-K,
In Butler,
And I had three and four year olds and five year olds, And
I absolutely adored it.

Marrying a Non-Jew

Not among my friends—
most—97 percent of them—married non-Jews
It's a good thing my parents loved Denny
Before we got married, of course
Every jewish mother wants their daughter to marry a jew
And she said: "Are you sure? You're still young. You have to wait until you're 21..."
Don't you want to date some more Jewish boys?"

And I did not marry a Jewish man And it'll be
49 years, and this December He's been the
backbone of our family. He has supported
our children in being Jewish And supported
me in everything I've done.

Was that difficult for him to have children being Jewish?

What was difficult was—

We wanted to have a rabbi and a priest at our wedding—

The priest was only for my in-laws, because my husband would have been fine with a rabbi.

Our rabbi at the time would not even talk to us.

He told my mother he would rather his daughter

Marry a black jew than a white non-jew

He would not allow us

To take the chuippa out of the synagogue

To marry anywhere else—

That upset Denny because he had thought about converting.

I told him: “absolutely not.”

I’m not marrying him to be a jew.

He had already agreed to raise our children to be jewish

As long as he was a good father and husband, it didn’t matter to me. So—my mother came to love and adore him, so it didn’t matter.

Learning to Love the Synagogue Again

After I got married

And came back to Butler—

That was for old ladies,

To be involved in the synagogue.

I would help if my mother needed help in the kitchen

For a bar or bat mitzvah, but...

Coming to sisterhood meetings

Was such an obnoxious thought in my head,

They're old ladies! Why would I sit with a bunch of them?
Eventually, I started coming,
And still didn't like it, but
I learned to love it
Because I learned to love *being* in the synagogue,
And got involved in teaching
And that was when I fell in love with B'nai Abraham all over again.

Synagogue Memories

I remember my father getting an award from Israeli Bonds— It
had to be something very special
Because my grandmother flew in from Chicago,
I don't remember what year it was, or how old I was

But I remember that synagogue was just packed,
And it was all for my dad,
And it just reinforced how important of a person he was,
And the good he did.

But I also remember Bernie levin did things—
A lottery, that's what it was.
All I remember is the hotdogs!

And there were art shows, There
was an art auction.

We Gave Them Wings

I'm sad to see it dying out
But I think that means as parents,
Of children that grew up in the synagogue,
Did our job, and did it well— We
gave them wings,
And they took those wings, and flew. As
much as I want my children here—
There's nothing here for them.
So I'm thrilled that they got the foundation
They needed from Butler,
And I think it had such a personal relationship
Teachers and congregation to our students,
That we gave them a good foundation To
go out to the greater world.

I Loved Every One of Them

Of course student attitudes have changed over the years.
 But that doesn't mean they changed for the worse.
 As I stated in my speech—
 Harry Greenberger had comic books inside his Hebrew books,
 So that was forty-some years ago!

There were little imps back then
 But they had more *respect*
 Back then—they knew they were coming to Sunday school
 On Sunday and it may not have been the favorite thing to do,
 But in most of my classes, we had fun. And I tried to bring
 Judaism in a more fun way Then just sitting there reading out
 of books.

But as kids got older
 They brought their phones in
 And they weren't sitting in their chairs,
 And I learned it's okay if the walk around the room,
 As long as they're still participating
 And —eh—it was fine. I loved every one of them.

*

I related my students to my sons' when they were their age.

I mostly had boys,
 And then of course I had two sons, I
 could relate to a lot of their: why bother?
 I'm embarrassed. I don't tell people I'm Jewish.
 To the ones that said: yes, my classmates
 Are jealous because we have Chanukkah for 8 days. I could relate to the
 children because I was a mother to children who were the same age as my later
 students.

More Ups

A roller coaster, a very fun exciting roller coaster.
Except I get sick on roller coasters. Maybe not
a roller coaster or merry go round... Of course
lives have ups and downs.
There's been so many more ups in my life.
Marrying the man of your dreams,
Having children that are beyond your wildest dreams,
And now grandchildren—
My life is *great*.

Two Women in My Life

There were two women in my life, Esther
Shriberg and Lori Bloomberg— They
were like my therapists.

Both of them went to their graves
Knowing things that nobody else ever did,
And when I had a hard time at the beginning, It
was Esther Striberg who would tell me:

*Take a deep breath,
And get through the moment.*

*If it's damaging, walk away.
If you still want to do it, walk forward.*

Teaching is what I always wanted to do.
So when I got the opportunity,
I wasn't doing it for the Board of Directors,
I wasn't doing it for the parents,
I was doing it for me and those students.

And so I walked away
From all the mishugas that was going on all around me.

And I just kept going.
And of course I had the support of my family.

And then later on Lori Bloomberg told me the same thing:

“Just keep going.”

She said, the look on your face when you talk about teaching, Is something you need to keep doing.

So I did.

My Feelings Inside

I remember a woman in our congregation—
 She was elderly, at a Hadassa luncheon
 She came up to me and said: “your marriage will never last.
 I can guarantee your marriage will never last,
 You don’t marry out of your faith.”

I held that against her for many many years
 And my husband said: “why? We’re still fine.”

I refer to God as helping me through this,
 Not God in a *person* image— I
 don’t think of God as a *person*—

I feel my god, my spiritual whatever is
 My feelings inside when I’m doing the things I love,
 And getting through the things that are hard that to get through.
 I don’t know if it’s God that gets me through it,
 Or the shoulders of the people I stand on—the strength of them—
 That help me get through this—

This Other Side

I wrestle with that—
I want to believe
My parents are looking down
And seeing their great-
grandchildren And they're
kvelling— And I know they're not.

CANTOR MICHAL GRAY-SCHAFFER:

BESHERT

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PART ONE: L' DOR VADOR Bucking the System

I was fortunate enough to have a mother who taught me that I could do anything that I put my mind to. and that's pretty much how I lived my life:

I take chances.

I realize now I already had in front of me her example of bucking the system.

One: she was in a family of conservative Republicans. She used to say she and Elenor Shaw were the only two democrats in Washington County. I'm sure it was hyperbole, but it wasn't too far from the truth.

She placed first in the test to be the postmaster of the county and because of her political leanings, she never got the job. But she didn't change her affiliation, she just went back to school became an art teacher.

My

Grandmother Helped to Keep Them Going

Despite my mother's father—
even though I didn't see my grandmother as a strong female figure—
my grandfather left them a number of times during the
Depression—

It was a family of two; my mother and her older sister
and my grandfather would just leave for a couple of years,
or six months or whatever...
I think he'd send back money for them to live on, although
I'm sure life wasn't easy—

my grandmother helped keep them going during the Depression.

My

Mother Was One Cool Woman!

My mother reinvented herself again—
she taught art for a number of years
and then in the seventies,
when all the school districts were cutting out art to save money, she
lost her job.

So she created a program at the county jail for inmates to
make wooden hope chests and things like that so they could
make some money and have some money when they got
out. which was very progressive for that time.

She became a deputy sheriff —
my mother was one cool woman!

The other thing that she did is she
went back to work when my brother
went to kindergarten women in that
era in my father's family
didn't work after marriage

and it was a *Shande!*

And my father did *not* want her to work. And
I remember this argument— at least my
mother talking about it—she said:

My

“our kids are going to be able to go to college
anywhere they want to go
and in order for that to happen—

I have to work.”

So starting when I was six and my brother was five, she
worked.

Mother’s Daughter

My father was a
farmer— a dairy
operation. I didn’t help—
because I was a girl,
so that worked to my advantage—

I went haying *once*.
I helped out with haying one day,
maybe when I was 12 or 13...

No!
I had other interests
and they didn’t intersect with farm life—

intellectual pursuits—

I was the kind of reader-
- under the covers, with a
flashlight.

And another thing about my mother:

My

The Bookmobile—

there was a library building but
we visited the bookmobile that
came to the village that was
closer to where we were.
it came every two weeks, and we were some of
the only people to visit it.

My mother and I would both go home with an armload!
All we could carry—and we would read them.

I was my mother's daughter.

She was a liberated woman, and
she passed it on to me.

Rolled Up Baggy Jeans and a Great Big Man's Shirt

Work was pretty much all my mother had time for besides raising us and keeping the house....

she loved the church.

She didn't make the easiest choices and she didn't make the prescribed choices for a woman of her generation.

She was a bit of a rebel.

I have a picture of her in art school in the early 50s or late 40s—

she's in baggy jeans, rolled up, and this great big huge man's shirt.

Insularity

People in that part of the country were
and still are insular and their horizons
had not been widened,

and no one was anything other than Christian
in our school, so no one had to even think
about other religions.

There wasn't too much thinking about Jews.
It just wasn't—never was—an issue.

It just never occurred to me.

Of course, in school back then
we're going to sing Christmas carols
and celebrate Christmas—

A Terrible Watershed Moment

When I was 11 and in the 6th Grade, a committee of my classmates came up to me and said:

“Unless you stop getting good grades, we’re not going to speak to you— no one in the class will speak to you.”

And part of this—it wasn’t that I was a braggart—it was my teacher— and this is on *her*—it was obvious

that I was the teacher’s pet and she was holding me up to the rest of the class, which terribly embarrassed me.

So it really wasn’t my fault.

And I reacted to that by somehow getting mononucleosis—

where an 11 year old gets mononucleosis I have *no* idea! But I was hospitalized for a couple of weeks. And I decided—oh, and another thing: my parents sold my horse—

it was a *terrible* watershed moment—

I just decided that I wasn’t going to let those other students pull me down. I had friends, but they weren’t *good* friends. They did some nasty things over the years so I had people to hang out with and people to talk with but they weren’t *loyal* friends.

But that’s ok. What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.

But it's hard to deal with that
when you're 11 years old.

My Happy Places

1. The Church

I wasn't born Jewish— I
was born a Methodist.
My religion was important to me.

The church was my support, my
happy place.

My mother was the choir director, the
organist, the soloist, and we were very
active in the church.

From the time I was one-year old, I
went to church every Sunday.

It wasn't a chore.
I loved it.

At one time I was even thinking that
I wanted to become a minister.

The church became my community, the
place where I was accepted because I
wasn't so accepted with my peers. The
church is where I went.

They liked me.

2. The Singing

Well, my mother trained me.
I sang in choirs since
I was very young and
in school choirs I
always went to state
competitions With
the state choirs,

And when I was in college I sang with a prestigious choir and I was the section leader. So...music was an important part of my life.

3. *The Theater*

I really loved returning to the theater after 20 years. It was wonderful, but it was a *real* stretch,

and I wasn't sure I could do it—especially since we had a director who *really* choreographed the numbers.

And I wasn't sure I could do it!
It was so intimidating!

But I did it and I think I did a credible job and it was fun, and I made friends.

The Pirates of Penzance!

I loved it!

4. *Back to the Farm*

I love horses and animals in general—I've always *loved* riding.

I'm a good rider—not a *fancy* rider, although I've done that, too, but

I'm a good common sense trail rider. That's my place to get away from it all. out in nature. Going back to the farm.

We were 50's kids. We played outside
for hours and hours and went to the
woods— played in the stream!

Now what mother would let her kids walk
down the state road a quarter of a mile and
play in the brook?

Outside the Box

One of the people I admired the most was the minister at the time and because the religious community had become my safe place—

after that incident that happened when I was in the sixth grade— I loved the church,

I admired Reverend Gilbert very much— I could see myself doing that.

Now that I think about it— I think I admired him for the wrong reasons. He came from a Mayflower family, and Gay, his wife, was one of the New York 100 families—

so *society*. Sophisticated.

In retrospect, having visited them over the years, he was pretty narrow-minded—

that's one of the things I love about Judaism—

thinking outside of the box. It's not only allowed, it's encouraged—

the intellectual component of Judaism, and the creativity.

The Seeker

In college I immediately went to the Methodist Chapel—
that was the big beautiful chapel on campus. In the
basement the Methodist Youth Fellowship
And a Hillel Chapter

I joined both.

I went to those a few years beyond college and
it was after that that I became a seeker.

Nothing was grabbing me —a
regular Methodist Church was
not doing it.

It was hard to duplicate the university openness.

I sought Unitarianism,
which is moving more toward Judaism

and the other thing is—my last three, four
significant relationships had all been with
Jewish men and I was engaged to one.

In retrospect—I wasn't a Jewish woman so that
relationship wasn't going to go any further.

And for another one, Judaism didn't mean anything to him,
but his father didn't think I was good enough for his son,
and he went to Synagogue only for business and to be seen
by business associates.

Not that that was so unusual, especially
in that generation.

But it was very distasteful to me.

A Jewish Soul in a Methodist Body

My husband is an ethical jew.

Judaism was very important to him and I recognized we were a good match in that. Our religion was very important to us.

I said I would raise the kids Jewish because the Jews needed more kids than Christians do.

And then, I started studying so I could be a part of the teachings of those children.

And I fell in love with Judaism.

And I realized I didn't like Jesus very much!
I never liked Jesus.

This is one of the things that made me say:

*I'm a Jewish soul born in
a methodist body!*

A Sinai Moment

I've had a moment that—

maybe a year or so after I converted with this rabbi in Rodolf Shalom in Pittsburgh— he'd always start a meeting with a joke or two.

So he told the joke:

There are two Jews sitting on a bus in the holy land— one's a tourist, one's a sabra. One of them looks at the other and says, "I knew you."

And then they play Jewish geography:

"Were you here?" Or "were you there?"—blah, blah blah—

no—their paths seemingly never crossed before. And then— all of a sudden, one of them suddenly says:

"I know. You were standing next to me at Sinai."

And at that moment I knew I was at Sinai.

I was one of the souls at Sinai.

Is Sinai a Metaphor?

I don't know, but I was there.
That's all I know.
And I wasn't frightened.

It wasn't a fearful thing.

But in keeping with the way my
mother was and the way
I've been in my life,

I think you could understand how
it *wouldn't* have been
a fearful thing for me,

even though, biblically,
the people were afraid
and they said to Moses—

*No you go, and you listen.
We want to hear it from
your mouth.*

I didn't *know* the teaching
that every Jew was there on
Mount Sinai.

Maybe 15 years later, when I
learned the teaching— that's
actually in the Torah—

that really blew me away.

I really feel that I have found
what I was supposed to find
and I'm finally doing what I
was supposed to do.

Pull Up Your Big Girl and Boy Panties

Loving God.
I always loved God.
And that didn't change.

Plus the intellectual part.
Always learning, always
questioning. Plus how
powerful the tradition was
for our kids.

And I totally reject the fact that we
are born evil and the only way we
can have 'grace,' whatever 'grace'
is—is through the sacrifice.

To me that's just such a cop out.

Pull up your big girl and boy panties
and leading a responsible ethical life—

that's really the way that I feel.

PART THREE: EVERY JEW IS IMPORTANT

Bashert

I came to B'nai Abraham in 2011.
I'll be finishing my 11th year in August.

I'd never been a spiritual leader before.
I was so anxious during the Oneg after
the interview with the board.

I wanted you to choose *me!*

Coming to Butler was like returning home
because I grew up in an even smaller area
where the town had 1500 people and the
village only 350.

So I felt I knew rural America.

From the time I saw your ad in the Jewish Chronicle,
I felt something about it was—about the situation—

Beshert.

Chocolate, Vanilla, and Strawberry

I remember a rebbetzin who told me:

that's why there's vanilla, chocolate and strawberry ice cream— because everybody likes something different.

My chaplaincy training was very useful in that you *listen*. You listen to people.

I've always followed that style:
you can't be a leader unless you have followers.

I've come to believe that you really have to listen to what people want and when I did propose programs

or did something they didn't want— they *told* me, and that's *ok*, because— it's not *my* congregation.

it's *your* congregation.

And if I don't listen to *you*,
what kind of leader am I?

Pulled in Different Directions

I was told pretty quickly that
some people thought: *Reform* was
a bad word. Frankly,

B'nai Abraham doesn't know how "reform" they are!

But—there were some things that I
did want to push forward, that I
would like to have seen happen.

I would have loved to have a Siddur
that had the transliteration linearly
alongside the Hebrew.

And because the prayerbook I wanted— and
I guess that's the only one like that— had
"Reform" on the cover—

We didn't get it.

So we dd order another,
much cheaper, prayerbook,
and people didn't like it.

So I wanted to get this more forward-thinking prayerbook— And
it didn't happen.

So I guess that was a disappointment, but
then you move on.

"We're the People Who Come"

I remember a couple of the congregants saying:

We're the people who come.
We're the people that support you.

And we want to use *our* prayerbook.

Where Real Jewish Life Occurs

One of the few rabbis that I esteem highly

Dr. Jacob at Rudolf Shalom—he's the emeritus now—

his father was the rabbi of a very small congregation
and he said that he “treated it like a big congregation

because “every Jew is important”—

And I think real Jewish life occurs in small
congregations where people still count on
the congregation to be their Jewish
experience.

And so I feel everything I've done is
important.

There's a statement one of our congregants made:

*As long as there is just one Jewish child at B'nai Abraham, we
will educate that person and we will treasure that person.*

Because it might be two Bar or Bat Mitzvah kids a year—
but for those kids to keep them interested in Judaism,
and provide them with the opportunity— every Jew
should have that choice,

If they wanted.

A Dozen Yellow Roses

I was at my usual coffee shop and
I was getting a cup of coffee
and in front of me in line—

they were reading their phones and
the initial reports
were just coming in—

the shootings at the Tree of Life
which was just two blocks away—

they thought there were multiple casualties— and
I just started crying.

I just starting crying.

I knew the people— it
had been 11 years— I
knew the people who
came every week—

the minyanaires, they call them
them the *minyanaires*.

And Rabbi Myers is a colleague of mine—
I just started crying— and quickly after that,
every business on Squirrel Hill either got a
call or a text—but they were going to shut
down. Everyone was to go into lockdown
and hide.

They didn't know whether it was going to spread,
or how many shooters, or if something else
would happen.

And I was just crying too hard to go to
my car, so I went down into the cellar
with the baristas, and they were just so
kind to me, and so caring, and loving,
and then it turns out one of their
favorite customers was killed actually two
of them,
but one of them—the doctor— was one of their favorites.

so I got a call on Monday— could
I come in and council *them*?

And I said that “surely you know, that
on Saturday, I was unconsolable,
and your baristas ministered to *me*.”

So I of course I said I would.

And I had bought a dozen yellow roses—
a little makeshift memorial— And just
before I was to go and council them, I
thought:

Well, what if we each had a rose,
and each of us lay a rose— they
could laid it at the memorial
for Jerry Rabinowitz, or the other man they knew—

and so I grabbed these little envelopes and stationary.
I pulled this together in five minutes— I grabbed
ribbon and a hole punch.

After we talked out things for
about 45 minutes, then I said:

“Why don’t we try this: write whatever
you want to write to Jerry, seal it, tie it to
a rose, and we’ll walk there together
and we’ll lay our roses.”

And there was just something
about the ritual of doing that
that was very powerful.

And they agreed.

It was closure for them.
At least maybe the start of closure for them,
and for me.

Keeping the Congregation Safe

I didn’t envision that I would spend so much time in
security concerns—

writing grants, going to webinars and seminars.

Dealing with an incident like the Tree of Life and the aftermath of that—the *emotional* aftermath of that. Those are the things I never would have envisioned.

The support of the community— I'm getting cold chills up and down my back even now, thinking about that—

how wonderful those pastors were and are.

PART FOUR: GOD'S OWN PRONOUN

The Patient No One Would Help

When I was doing my chaplaincy at the VA Hospital, there was this man who had done something truly terrible— he had raped a seven year old girl to death.

And he had served 20 or 25 years and he had done his time, and he was out— he was pretty pathetic—this man

was totally broken and the nurses would not speak to him,

they just went in and did his care, the minimal amount of care, and I just thought:

well, first of all, I knew he was scared to death of dying because he was afraid of what kind of retribution he might be facing,

And I thought:

“you know we *have* to judge somehow, especially where the law is concerned. But, you know, it’s not my place to judge him

when everyone else did.

And he wouldn’t open up to me and the only way—sometimes he’d let me just sit there while he fell asleep— he had a very hard time sleeping.

He kind of liked having somebody there.

And the other thing was whenever he got his bi-monthly something from the VA and he would have extra money to buy snacks— he was

in a wheelchair by this time— I would take him down to the commissary to get candy.

Because the nurses didn't even want to do that.

So—he had something, some kind of hemorrhage and he just bled out one night, and died.

And when I came the next morning, he was all gone there was no chance—

he was dead, and he was gone.

So—anyways—you do what you can.

Lashon Hara

We shouldn't judge.
I don't feel that we should.
My fallback for that—

judgement is for God.

And I know we need to
hold people accountable
but other than the law, to
me it devolves Into gossip
and meanness.

Gossip is forbidden...and meanness—
I don't want that in my life.

Many of Christ's teaching resonate with me.
But, you know, he was Jewish.
I think he said things in an
easier way to understand.

Like Hillel said this:
*What is hateful to you—
do not do to your neighbor.*

I think the reason that I can be so open— that
certainly was not in the way I learned
to be a human being In Shushan, New York—

when we did chaplaincy training, we basically
broke ourselves down in every way because
if we didn't know our issues, how could we
help somebody else with their issues?

For me it was very powerful because I
was raised by stick-up-their behind
people ... and—you know like Old
New England *more righteous than you.*

So that wasn't really part of my culture.

That's another thing about Judaism— It's much more open about things.

I Don't Want to Eat Anything with Eyes

I made the decision not to eat animals— or meat meat, 50 years ago. Pretty young.

But I did eat poultry and fish— I gave that up about ten years ago.

I almost died from a piece of fish. and so I decided that was a good time to become a vegetarian. And—it's funny—

being one, the fact that chickens are raised in horrible conditions— that was always in the back of my mind.

But ever since I stopped eating them, it's loomed larger and larger.

Now I remain a vegetarian as much for the fact that I don't want to eat anything with eyes. I don't want to eat an animal.

I don't want an animal to be killed for me.

It's easier on the planet because beef especially takes so much energy to produce.

Part of being a good steward of the earth Is not contributing to my carbon footprint by eating animals. Trying to be as much plant-based as I can be.

God's Own Pronoun

Let's face it—it's a patriarchal religion. At least in the way it was written down by who wrote it down.

Who gets to write its history?
Who gets to write the spiritual manuals?

And it's not a feminist thing, although the feminist thing is there— I am a strong feminist—

for me, it's more that God should have had God's own pronoun.

Because when you put a pronoun on God, that brings God down into something that God is not,

like God is not a "he." God is unknowable, so how can it be a "he"?

I mean—God a "he," a "she," —everything. So it kind of *shrinks* God to something that's more understandable for people, but it also means

that half the population don't see themselves in God.

And half the population do.

And that is more empowering for men worshippers in the past than it has been for women.

A Good Match

My first love of Judaism
was the intellectual pursuit—

you're always learning.
You're meant to be learning your whole life.

But it's really living life to the fullness.
Being a good person in this life.

Not because you're rewarded in
some future life,

but because— it's the
right thing to do.

And you're taking responsibility for yourself
and I think that's the way I always was.

And that's why Judaism and I are a good match, as
far as I'm concerned.

ERIC LEVIN: MY DEVOTION

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First Realization of Illness

My wife told me I wasn't acting normally.

How many wives tell their husbands that during the course of the year
let alone have it *be* something?

It didn't worry me.

No, not at all.

She wanted me to go to the hospital immediately,

and I told her: *no*.

But I wasn't give much of a choice.

When we got the hospital,
we couldn't get in to the emergency room because of
Covid, so my wife told them she thinks I had Covid and
that got me through the front door.

Then she told them she thought I
was having a stroke.

I didn't hear her say that at all— I didn't know.

Later That Evening

My wife said something, and it was out of context, and it didn't make sense, and she told me earlier in the day that I was having trouble with little things,

like what day of the week it was, and what time of the day it was, and she said: "that's it. we're going to the hospital."

And I said, "*no*, I'm *not* going to the hospital," and the next thing I know my brother Joe was there standing over me and he looked at me and said:

"get off the couch. Get dressed. Your wife says I'm taking you to the hospital."

Like, ok, let's go.

At the Hospital I was

there for a few hours.

A doctor finally came in and said:

“please stand with your hands
against the wall”—

And I’m like: “ok.”

I had no idea what he was doing.

It turns out he was doing a Portable CT Scan. I
didn’t even know that existed.

And about 45 minutes later, they
came and told me the results.

They pulled me aside.

The doctor said “we have the results. We found
something on your brain and we want to get you
down to Shadyside Hospital.” **It Was Really Really
Really Tough**

It was a little more rough for me than normal, because I had all
three of my kids in the hospital at the same time,

and my son Jordan was standing right next to me and—
I just get emotional when I talk about this— I just
remember him putting his head on my shoulders and
starting to cry, and it was tough.

Because I didn’t know what to tell him. So
that was really really really tough.

That part.

Then I looked at Michelle and said:

“Ok. I don’t know what this is.

But we got work to do.”

Mesmerized By the Synagogue

If I was given something to reference, I would say: Eliezer Ben Yehuda, the rabbi here at that time.

I went to Sunday school and Hebrew School at the synagogue and he was the rabbi.

The smartest guy I knew.

I was at the synagogue all the time with my father.

We went to services every Friday night.

I was mesmerized by going to synagogue—
 I loved it, I loved the services, I loved
 spirituality of it all—I still do, that has
 never changed for me, even when I just
 go on Friday nights, and I walk in the
 door, and there's four or five people in
 there— it doesn't matter to me.
 To know the Hebrew, the prayers, the tunes— that's
 what I set out to do.

I wanted to learn the service as well as I could.
 If I ever needed to fill in then so be it.
 I truly enjoyed that.

BBYO

BBYO is B'nai Brith Youth Organization It
 had city chapters.
 It was a way for all of us younger Jewish people at
 the time to get to know and meet other Jewish kids
 in the Western, PA area.

Once I got my driver's license,
 I would travel to other communities every weekend. Before that,
 as often as my brothers or parents were available to drive us to
 wherever the destination was of the planned event.

We went to Sharon, New Castle, Elwood City,

Morgantown, sometimes Wheeling, and Kittaning when they had a chapter. We did Jewish programing— on Friday nights, everyone went to the synagogue.

We had a community service, and then on Saturdays we had events to keep everyone busy. Sometimes it could be a sporting event. And on Sundays everyone packed up, went home, and then we all got together the next Friday night

because we enjoyed everyone's company so much that we— that it wasn't just a weekend that we spent— we spent every Friday and Saturday night together.

I liked being with my Jewish teenage friends—yes.

We were the ones that planned everything—the Jewish activities—we had no adult supervision for the most part, we as the teenagers planned all of the events— the services, everything.

And—I don't know why I'm hesitating in answering that question— I did run a lot of the services.

Eliezer the Role Model

The only thing I can figure out is that when we were in grade school, perhaps 8th grade,

they gave us this standardized pinprick tests to try to figure out what we wanted to do with our lives, and my came back: *clergy*.

I thought about it seriously.

Eliezer was a role model— I've never held back on this— to me, he's the best teacher whether it was clergy or whatever that I ever had.

He was tough on me.

At that time I was thinking about doing that as a lifelong possibility.

Making My Parents Proud

I went to college to be a doctor—that didn't work. I needed to get my grade point average in order and the best way to do that was through a political science major.

Normally when you become a political science major you end up going to law school. I needed to get somewhere where I would know I was getting my degree and I was going to make my family proud.

That's where I was at this point and it was 1986. All the lawyers I talked to said, "You don't want to do this."

It was not a difficult thing to make my mother proud.
I know people will snicker every time I say that!
But it was true, really.
nor my father, quite frankly.

Inheriting My Father's Legacy

My father was proud every time I walked into the synagogue with him.

I think it's pretty clear.
I definitely did inherited his legacy

and it wasn't that hard for me as his son to figure out where he was
going over the last five, six years of this life.

It was pretty obvious that this is what he planned for
me and—absolutely— that was what I had to do.

Nobody Messed with My Father

His diligence to attending services and his diligence to the community— not just the synagogue, Jewish community— I mean the Butler business community in general.

Everyone respected him—
as a small business owner in Butler. Nobody really messed with him—

he just went about his business and did the best he could to run a small business in a small town.

My Brothers Inherited the Business, I Inherited the Synagogue

I didn't like getting my hands dirty, quite frankly.

The pressure from my family was to *get away* from the business.

My brothers Joe and Scott were in the business together. My parents did not think that the business could sustain three families for another 30 years.

It was my decision about taking care of the synagogue.

I felt my father expected me to take over the synagogue

when he passed away—and the cemetery.

It was a blessing.

On the Challenge of a Dwindling Congregation

Sometimes it's *really* tough— I'm not going to lie about it. I'll

give you an example—

when we had the water damage a few years ago,
and we had the restoration done, we had a really nice re-opening

and within a week after the opening there
was another leak in the synagogue—

and I remember being down there, and I was sitting in the sanctuary, and I think I
was talking to you on the phone, Larry, and I just—couldn't stop crying.

Couldn't believe it.

All that work to
see it leak again.

And that quickly.
And that much water.

So that was heartbreaking for me.

Memories of Synagogue

The Sisterhood and the Men's Group— they
used to do a lot of things at the synagogue.

Some of the leaders of the synagogue in those days:
The bigger names: The Cohens, Murray Horowitz...
Murray Horowitz scarred everybody.
You didn't want to get in his bad graces as a kid.

He was an older guy
who came to synagogue in a suit and tie
and a black fedora
and that whole group sat together in the synagogue and—
I think it was just the way they all packed together— and they sat together:
that scared all us kids.

Being a Jew in Butler, PA

I had a mixed group here of Jews and Gentiles.
It was the only way to survive.

Even though there were no other real Jewish kids here, no Jewish programing,
being Jewish and doing everything was still very important to me. It is what it is. I
played football for a year.

I assessed my situation on the team and before my junior year
I realized I was probably never going to start
and at the point I was extremely active in BBYO which meant traveling every Friday night
so I walked away from football to deal with my duties as president of BBYO, local
chapter.

The Jewish Religion is Easy

I like the Jewish religion because
the Jewish religion is *easy*.

In the Jewish religion, we have one day a year, Yom Kippur,
when we confess our sins.

Not five times a year, six times a year— one time a year.

I had numerous people say— “Geez, if I had to change religions, I’m changing to yours—
you only have to come to synagogue *once* a year.” That’s pretty much easy.

I still only have to go once a year to
accomplish the rituals of Yom Kippur.

What Inspires My Devotion to Judaism

I can answer that now, more than if I was asked this question maybe three months ago.

Since April, I've really felt spirituality going around.
And the people that are saying prayers for me.
Ever since that first night we came home from the hospital—
I just felt it more, and I felt it important— more important
than usual.

And I don't want this to sound terrible— but
probably more now than two months ago.

I think there's a *special* God, beyond the
rituals and beyond the kosher.

And I will say this,

I give the cantor a lot of credit because she has been there for me since the first night I came home here at the house, saying prayers, and it's just been— and that's been a huge, huge thing.

And she knows how I feel about that.

The Family

One of the things
when I agreed to move back to Butler— It
wasn't a big arm twisting—

we knew as soon as we were having three kids that we were going to raise them here in Butler and not down in Pittsburgh and it looks as if it was a very smart decision

but the one thing I always wanted my family to see the Butler family, seeing how we interact and grow together, and I thought it was going to be important to my kids, and I think it was— it was extremely important to how they act.

I tell this story all the time- It's an amazing story.

My dad passed away five years ago. Since
the night my father passed away,
my son has called my wife's father every night like clockwork—

not a night has gone by when he has
not called his grandfather.

That's what I expect my family to get out of being back here and seeing how my family acts with each other.

Triplets

After hearing we were having triplets, we drove around for quite a while.

We don't look back on that time as tough.

Everyone who used to drive by our driveway would always see like eight cars in there because we always had cars here, and people here, helping out and doing stuff.

My Humor

What would I change, if I could? Nothing, really.

To have found a big city girl.

I'm kidding.

My wife might not like my humor, but she *gets* my humor.

LARRY BERG: GOOD BEHAVIOR

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We Bought a Radio Station

How did I get involved with B'nai Abraham?
That was simple-- We came to Butler in
1964, and we knew anybody, didn't know
one soul.

We had just bought the radio station, and it had been on
the verge of bankruptcy for a long time, so we were taking
over a real tough situation.

But that was all we could afford.
And my partner was the one who originally bought the station from
the *Butler Eagle* in 1949.

And there were original studios In
the Old Nixon Hotel.
But they really didn't know what they were doing

because they were in the newspaper business. I don't
know what kind of details you want out of this. Because
you asked about my relationship to the synagogue and
I'm telling you about my career.

My Parents Kept a Kosher Home

Because their parents lived right near us In the same apartment building.

As a deference to *them*, my parents kept a kosher home.

We went to the synagogue once a year on the High
Holidays.

My father was not particularly a practicer.
My mother was more Jewish than my father.

But I always knew that I was Jewish.

We kept a kosher home which was not really all
that unique in those days.

We lived in the upper end of Manhattan, above Fort Tryon Park,
called Inwood, just below that is Washington Heights, and below
that is Harlem.

I went to Hebrew school on a regular basis,

And I was bar mitzvah.

There was not an awful lot of Jewishness in my
family in the sense you might think a kosher family
would have been.

But I was Jewish.

My Parents' Parents Came from Russia My father was

born on the Lower East Side of New York,

and my mother was born in England. But
their parents both came from Russia.

My mother's parents lived in the apartment just
below us.

They came from Russia to England

and they lived in England for a number of years,
and all of their children were born in England.

And then they came to America.

I Wrote Something on Shabbos

When I was six or seven years old I remember being admonished because I wrote something on Shabbos. And you're not supposed to write on Shabbos.

And that didn't last very long.

My Father Grew Up on the Lower East Side

My father told me that in the Lower East Side—there were groups that hated the Irish, there

were groups that hated the Germans, there were groups that hated the French, there were people that hated the Scotch, and all of them hated the Jews.

And my father—

I remember that one year for his birthday I gave him a book called *The Lower East Side*

and it was a history of the times he grew up on the Lower East side, and it showed pictures of the tenements and showed pictures of living conditions and the pushcarts and all that stuff.

He didn't read the book for six or seven *months* because he didn't want to remember. The days were so...really bad.

It was a *very* tough living for a Jew in New York in those days.

Even though there were many Jews there, it was still very tough for them.

My Mother Consoled Me

In *my* lifetime, in my early lifetime, I never felt *any* sense of anti-Semitism until during World War II, and this must have been 1944, 45, 43... something like that...

I remember I was walking up the street, after picking up something from the grocery store— walking up the street towards our apartment building—

a kid, an older kid— I
 must have been...11
 And he was something like...16—

he was on a bicycle and he stopped and said:
Hey Kid, are you a Jew?

And I said, *Yeah*.
 And he punched me in the face.

I ran home crying.
 And I remember my mother telling me:

*You're better than they are. Don't listen to what they say. You're
 a much better person. Jews are much better people.*

She consoled me.

But that was the first experience I'd ever had and I'm not even sure that I *heard*
 much about anti-Semitism up until that time.

There was never any inking of that besides that *one* guy.

The Teachers Read from the New Testament

There was something before that— I just remembered:

In 1937 or 1938 we had moved to a little town in New Jersey. Verona, New Jersey,
 because my father took a new job in that area, and I remember going to grade
 school— I was in second or third grade.

I remember every morning in school,
 the teachers read from the New Testament, and it confused me,

because I never heard those kinds of *words* before,
 and I never heard about *Jesus Christ* before.

The whole thing sounded foreign to me. Literally.
So that was the first impression I had that we're *different*.

But I Never Had the Feeling of Separation

We had a little synagogue right across the street from where we lived and I never had a problem.

I had two close friends— one lived across the street—he was Catholic and one lived a couple of blocks away and he was Jewish.

And I never felt a sense of anti-Semitism— I felt a difference because of that Bible reading, but, thinking back, I don't remember if anybody else in the class

felt different, because *they* might have, too.

It was a foreign reading to me.
I don't know what it meant to anybody else. I might have *assumed* that it was for them and not for *me* but I don't think it went much farther than that.

I never felt self-conscious about being Jewish—there was no reason to. Because even though it was *foreign*, they didn't point to me and say:

this is not yours, buddy.

A Lot of Refugees Came Here

I didn't think about the treatment of the Jews in Europe at all. I didn't pay attention to the newspapers very much. I do remember that just before the war and during the war a lot of refugees came here. And many in our neighborhood were Jews. And they were strange people— they talked funny, they looked funny, they dressed funny.

And so they were just *different* as far as I was concerned. Knowing what their background was— I don't think I knew much about that.

I didn't see any connection between them and my grandparents.

These were *refugees*.

And my grandparents had been here a long enough.

My gosh, they were *Americans*.

I don't remember— because these were *Germans*— if I related them to Nazis.

My intellect didn't go that far.

I don't remember that they were fleeing anybody— they just came to this country. I don't remember anything more in-depth than that.

I was a pretty shallow kid.

Everyone I Knew Believed in God It's

funny, you know—

speaking now is not the way I would have spoken then, I'm sure, but— everybody I knew of believed in God.

Whether they were Catholics or Jewish or whatever they were— they all believed in God.

So believing in God— it was the *same* God.

That's what I'm thinking now.

Because I didn't think about that— It was not unusual—

There's God and *there's* God and
there's God and *there's* God—

And we're all praying to God.

TWO: LET PEOPLE KNOW WHO I AM**I Knew We Had to Meet People**

It's so simple.

When we came to town, we knew nobody.
Instinctively, or intellectually or both-- I knew I had to meet people:

I had to get around as much as I could:

I had to join as many organizations as I could,
I had to get involved in Rotary Club, I had to get
involved with the Easter Seals, anybody who would
have me, I got involved with it—

the Butler Symphony Orchestra, and I got involved with
the synagogue for *business* reasons.
Because I never went to the synagogue except for High Holidays.

I was *always* a Jew.

Go Back and Write Down: *Lutheran*

I was turned down at the Radio Corporation of America, NBC because I was a Jew—I may not have mentioned that—

When I was going to college, I worked for a small radio station for two or three years and they went off the air because it was an FM station and very few people had FM sets in those days.

So I was looking for another job— and a fellow in my class at NYU said:

“Well, they’re hiring page boys at NBC.” These ushers in the theaters that NBC had—

They had radio theaters where they had a thousand people watching the radio show and then they had the hot lucky strike radio hit parade television program and they had audiences there and so they had whole page staff and he said, “well, they’re hiring,”

so I went up and I was interviewed, filled out an application and you had to put your religion down —it has since become illegal—

and I put down *Jewish*—
I think you had to put down *Hebrew* in those days—

I didn't get the job.

And I went back to school a couple of days later and said: "well, I didn't get the job,"

And that fellow asked:
"well, what did you put down for your religion?"

I said, "Jewish."
And he said: "Go back and write down "Lutheran."

So I went back and I wrote down, "Lutheran."

I was interviewed by the *same guy* a couple of weeks later.
And he hired me! And the corporation was started by —

and was run by—David Sarnoff— a Jew!

You Can't Be an Engineer

I'll give you another example:
When I was in High School,
I didn't know what I wanted to do, except go to college.
And my mother took me to the Federation of Jewish
Philanthropies— a *major* organization in New York— two days, two
nights battery of aptitude tests to find out what I wanted to do. After
two days we went back and they analyzed it and they said:

"Everything indicates that you should be an engineer:
you're mathematical, your spatial"—all that stuff, *But*,
they said "you *can't* be an engineer because engineer
companies don't hire Jews.
So think about something else."

Probably the best thing that ever happened to me. Because
I ended up where I should have been.

Larry Monroe Is Your Name

In my Freshman year I got a job as an intern— that is a non-paid on-the air-person

at a small FM station in New York, and I took the audition and I passed!—It surprised me— I was 16 years old— I was *really* surprised—!

And the interviewer said: “you can’t use “Larry Berg” because there are *no* ethnic names on the radio.”

All these names that you hear about— their last names, many of them are Jewish— but they don’t use them.

“What’s your middle name?” I said, “Monroe.”

“Well, “Larry Monroe” is your name.”

And that’s the name I used for 16 years before we came to Butler.

Let People Know Who I Am

I decided—
I own a radio station,
I'm going to be out selling advertising, I want
to get involved with the community— let's
let people know who I am.

There's no sense hiding behind being Jewish.
And the funny part about it is: it
made *no* difference.
We found *no*, not *one* semblance of anti-Semitism.

And we were calling on new advertisers,
being invited to join all sorts of different clubs and organizations
which were run by the non-Jewish core of movers and shakers—
not *one* semblance of it.

The Only Jews in the Butler Country Club

We were the only Jews in the Butler Country Club. I was in Rotary with somebody and by that time I'd been around the community—

I'd emceed every event in town for fifteen years or something like that and I was on the radio everyday and one of the really inside guys, one of the really big hitters in Butler, says:

“Larry, I want you and your wife to be in the country club.”
I said, “Jack, that’s really very nice. I appreciate that.”

But I said, “There are a couple of questions. I don’t know who makes the decision.” And he knew what I was talking about because there were only two previous Jews in there and they were long gone.

I said: “I don’t know who are the ones who make this decision. Go talk to them and find out whether I’m going to get in

because I don't want to embarrass me and, more importantly, I don't want to embarrass *you*.

And a few days later he came back he said:

“Only one person turned you down.”

And the manager of the Mellon Bank at that time was the president of the country club and he wanted to *co-sponsor* me.

So I got into the country club.

The One Person Who Turned Me down

And the one person who turned me down I used to see at Rotary.

Every Monday he acted like he was my best friend.

I knew who he was.

And he never knew I knew.

Two Things Became Three Things

Well, there are two things— in fact, two things became three things—

one thing is owning a business— that in itself puts you in a different class of people.

Number two: being on the radio everyday puts you in a very unique class in Butler because very few people in Butler are on the radio everyday

and the program that I was doing became—excuse me— became an important program, so that added another cache.

The *pièce de résistance* came in 1972— almost 20 years after we got here, when I was asked to do a program on KDKA and when that happened,

All bars were down.

About That Third Thing

As a matter of fact,
I really believe the reason we got into the
country club was because I was on KDKA.

And that meant a lot to a lot of people.

I remember—
we were invited by a couple of non-Jewish good friends
to go to the Pittsburgh Opera and on the way to the opera
they wanted to take us to dinner at the country club

And we were sitting there
and everyone was looking over at the other side of the table—

because Jack Bogut from KDKA — the
most famous morning man
Pittsburgh had seen since some big shot before him...

he was BIG,

he had the biggest audience by far, he had more money than anybody, he was HUGE— well, he was sitting at the next table, and everybody was ooo-ing and aw-ing at him, and he walked over to our table and said: “Hey Larry. How ya’ doin’?”

Cause I introduced him at a Rotary event that he was the guest speaker about three months before.

Everybody in that club said: “My God! Who is this guy that Jack Bogut...?”

So that adds to the cache. And two years later, I was down at KDKA.

I’m Trying to Be Objective

Think about the aura, and I’m trying to be objective— —I sound like an egomaniac probably— it opened a lot of doors.

I got involved with Rotary, and became President of Rotary.

Then I got involved with the Chamber of Commerce, and I became the President of the Chamber of Commerce.

And being on radio every day with a very popular radio program.

And being everywhere—

I exceeded most of the major events in town for twenty years, so I was everywhere.

My situation was really unique. I was fortunate.

Fortunate.

Two Classifications of Jews

Funny part about being Jewish making it harder was— not for us. There are two classifications of Butler Jews:

ones who came here, and ones who were born and raised here.

The ones who were born and raised here went through a lot of anti-Semitism.

You talk to people—there was a lot of anti-Semitism.

You talk to a lot of people.

Both for children and for adults.

We missed all that.

THREE: MY TURN

Joining the Synagogue Was Just Business

It was *cold-hearted* business thinking.

I never went to the synagogue except for a bar mitzvah or something and the High Holidays.

But I knew I'd be watched and I'd have to belong to a religious organization.

In addition to that, a lot of Jews owned business.

It was not a *religious* decision.
Maybe I should be ashamed to say that.

The same way I joined all those other organizations.

It was a piece of the puzzle. I had to be known, I had to be seen—

in other to sell *advertising*.

More Besides Selling Advertising After

a while a number of things happened.

Number one:

I began to feel an obligation to my religion.

I began to take my religion more seriously.

Because before I thought about was career and my family. That's all I

thought about. And it started seeping into me— there's more to

religion than just finding somebody to buy advertising.

My Turn

And then as I got involved with the synagogue they asked me to get on the Board at first and then they asked me to be president and I thought:

“Boy this is *amazing*...imagine they’re asking *me*...” Well, I realized there weren’t many guys to go around!

And I’m the last of the Mohicans!

I remember Murray Horowitz called me on the phone and he said: “Larry, it’s your turn.”

I said, “what are you talking about?”

It Just Seeped In

But then not only did the *atmosphere*
of the synagogue seep into my
system,
but I became grateful because so many nice things were happening—

Not only nice things, because we had some four or five years when
things were tough, really tough—to get things off the ground.

Grateful.

And—who am I grateful to?

God.

I started going regularly, as regularly as I could—

hearing the rabbi speak, mingling with other Jews,
 being among prayers and hearing these prayers and
 bringing these things into my mind that the
 structures of Judaism and the feelings of being
 Jewish— it just seeped in.

Something I'm Only Beginning to Understand

Feelings of being Jewish—
 Something I'm only beginning to understand, maybe
 in the last five or ten years—

And it's easier for me to say it now because I'm learning so much in
 the last two or three or four years—

and I've been exposed to an ultra-orthodox side of the
 family, and they don't preach to me or anything, but certain
 things seep in you can't help but notice: a lifestyle and an
 attitude.

and I think with all the sermons and all
 these other things I just mentioned

I believe how important God is and the influence of God in the world
 and the influence God has on *me*.

So it's a huge picture that I never saw before.
 Because I was only concerned about me and my family.

It's probably a release from selfishness.

They Wanted to Protect Their Child

My middle daughter married a Jewish fella from Pittsburgh
and after they had their first child they got scared
so they became observant Jews—*frum* because
they wanted to protect that child from the
terrible world outside.

And so ever since that happened we
picked up some of what they do
and what they believe
and saw the way they lived among other people so we
saw a different side of Judaism— a more serious side of
Judaism than I've ever seen before.

And that touched us, I think.

God Is a Reminding God

And I've come to believe that
God is directing all of us
and if we listen to what God says it tells us how to behave

and that to me is the essence of
what Judaism is.

I was telling Ben one time about a year ago— he
was talking about the punishing God—

And I said:
“No. God is not a punishing God.

God is a *reminding* God.
Reminding you of what to believe.
And what kind of life to lead.”

Good Behavior

I tend to oversimplify.

I'm sure more religious people will disagree with what my feeling is.

My feeling is that God and the Torah and Mount Sinai and Egypt is all dramatizing a lesson.

And the lesson is very simple:

Good behavior.

You've heard the Hillel story—

Do not do unto others as they would do not onto you. That is all there is.

The rest is commentary.

And that to me is the *essence* of what I believe.

More broadly I believe that most religions came from the same core and the purpose of most religions and the purpose of most religions— the outcome of most religions— is good behavior.

I think Judaism is special because it's the first one to believe in one God.

And maybe it was God who said all these things.

What I Am Today

is a conglomerate of all that came before me. And I would not be the person I am today— if it weren't for every single thing that happened before me.

Every experience molded me and if I hadn't had that experience: with the kid on the bicycle punching me in the face if I hadn't had the experience of being turned down at NBC for a job, if I hadn't had the experience of growing up with non-Jewish kids, I wouldn't be what I am today — whatever I am.

And the more I understand Judaism and the more I understand myself and the more I understand life— the more I believe that we are directed by God.

That God is telling us what to do.

We just have to listen—and remember.

A Better Person

If you're listening to God you gotta' listen to more than a few things.

What is atoning?

It's not God punishing you.

You're punishing *yourself*.

And that's the most effective way to change your ways. It's self-introspection.

You're examining yourself to try to be as honest as you can and most people are not.

It's just like
when some people go to services and
they know all the verses and they know
all the tunes but they don't know what
they're *saying*.

They don't know what most Hebrew tunes are saying— but they know them— So
what good is that? What does that mean?

There's a lesson in every *one* of those words.

And the lesson keeps repeating itself. We read them all because each one has a nuance to it. The Catholics have confession and so do we.

Ours is more important because we
are confessing to *ourselves*.

Being a better person.

What else is religion all about?

What's religion supposed to be besides that?

I believe

when we die our soul transfers to another person
not yet born.

And so we must live as pure a life as
possible

because we're responsible for
another person's soul.

HERBIE AND SARA GROSSMAN: WE'LL BE HERE

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PART ONE: THE STORY OF HERBIE AND SARA One: Herbie

Absolutely No Student

I grew up in Butler, I
 graduated High School,
 went to Grove City College—

I went to college to make my father and mother happy, because
 I was *absolutely* no student!

Grove City College was a Christian College.
I had to go to services every day.

Since they found out I was a Jew,
the pre-theological students wanted me to go to their rooms
and talk about religion, which, at that time, they knew more
about religion than I did.

So I never went.

You're in the Army Now

In the second year,
I got a letter from the draft board:

“Your friends and neighbors
want you to go to the army.”

I went to basic training— the Korean
War was on at that time—

they had problems keeping track of how much ammunition they had so they sent me to an ordinance school at Aberdeen Proving Ground where I learned records keeping for Ordinance.

I also learned how to use explosives:

If the ordinance depot was overrun, we were supposed to blow up the timers on the explosives, so I was well-versed in explosives.

It was day to day, and who knew?

What Are You Gonna Do?

I got out of the army. My father had passed away, and at that time my brother came to me and said:

What are you gonna do?

I said: “Well we had a family that owned a Jiffy State— and I’m going to work for them.”

“Well,” he says, “come in the store— you’ll
own half
and we’ll make go.”

I said, “OK, fine.”

Compassionate Discharge

I lived with my brother and my mother and
that was my whole life.

I had no plans when I got
out of the service.

Before I got out of the service, my father
had passed away and my mother had gotten
mentally deficient.

They were up against what to do with her— they
felt if I came home,
i

t would be an advantage— so I got a
compassionate transfer to Pittsburgh.

The White Tuxedo

And when I first arrived in Pittsburgh I
was right above Kennywood Park, and
there was a gun emplacement up there, and
I had friends in Butler—

One Jewish friend who was going to school
in Little Washington, Pennsylvania got me
invited to a formal dance at PCW,
Pennsylvania College for Women, called Chatham College now.

I found a way to get a tuxedo, got dressed in the tuxedo pants and the white shirt, and they had such a thing as “manning”:

When the whistle blew, they had this big gun.

My position on the gun was: the man would unload the shell, hand it to me, and I would hand it to somebody else.

They would put it inside of the gun, and somebody else would pull the lever.

I was on the gun with the tuxedo and the white shirt, and the man wanted me to hand him this shell— I told him where to put the shell.

I thought I was going to get court martialed!

They all laughed because I’m standing there with a white shirt and a tuxedo!

Two: Sara

Like an Indentured Servant

My father came over in steerage,
and he landed in Galveston—

he was like an indentured servant, he had to go to work in the mines— the copper mines in the west, as I remember correctly.

He was an extremely hard worker,
extremely strong. He then paid
off his debt

and his aunt wanted him to go Carlisle.

He got to Carlisle, and the aunt had passed away.

The Youngest Daughter

My father went back to Lithuania— his mother
said to him, “It’s time to get married.”

My father was like 35 years old,
and so this lady down the street has three daughters— so
he picked the youngest daughter—that was my mother.
That was in Lithuania.

My mother had a hard time getting over because she had some kind of eye disease, and that eye disease—today they don't even bother with that.

He went back to Lithuania maybe seven years after he came here. This was way before the Holocaust.
I was born in 36.

From Lithuania to Carlisle, PA

I'm from Carlisle, PA.
There weren't many Jewish people there.
I had quite a few non-Jewish friends.

My father had an aunt there— he came over to this country:

A group of philanthropists brought all these people to the United States so he came in from

Lithuania through Galveston. It had to be in the 1920s, and there is a project called the Galveston Project and they brought all these people over because they wanted people to be in that part of the country. Cause there were not a lot of Jews in that part of the country.

My father's aunt kept saying:
"Come to Carlisle, it's a good place."

So that's what my father did.

Nobody Knew What a Jew Was

You just didn't talk about being Jewish— nobody knew what a Jew was.

When the holidays came, we always went to the synagogue in Harrisburg.

We went once a year to Harrisburg.
So we had to write the note:
"Please excuse Sara for religious holidays."

So that when you went to the guidance counselor— there was always a question about that.

I didn't really feel a sense of anti-Semitism in Carlisle.
I don't think my schoolmates were aware I was Jewish.

We celebrated the holidays, we lit the candles, and my mother tried to keep a kosher home.

My father used to go to Harrisburg to bring back kosher meat.

I felt different because I was Jewish.
I think I felt I wanted to fit in.

I *did* want a Christmas tree— I got a little Christmas tree.
My father allowed it, but then he took it down.

My parents talked Yiddish in the house.

Three: Sara and Herbie: A Romance

Sara:

I worked in Pittsburgh at the Bureau of Mines, and we had a Jewish personal person there, and I said to her:
“I'd like to meet some Jewish people,”
and she said, ‘I know this girl named Goldie...and I'll talk to her.’”

So Goldie invited me to this party, so who shows up, but Herb!

I was 21.
Herb, you were three years older, you were 24.

When I met Herb, he was just getting out of the service.
He said he was tired of staying at home with his mother,
and he went to this dance.

I met him at this party,
but then a week later I went to the YMHA dance, and
they had all Jewish people.

Then I met him there.

The girls sat on one side,
And the boys sat on the other.
The next week he asked me out for a date.

Herbie:

She had blue eyes and a dress to match.

The first date was at Eat and Park. Eat and Park at
that time had a coupon, and every time you got a
hamburger you got a coupon, so thus you got a free
hamburger!

I was a sport.

Ah, yeah, she was a cheap date!

Sara:

We were dating for about six months, and
he said:

“I think we should get married
because I don’t want to drive to Pittsburgh in the bad weather.”

So I remember that.

Herb:

I was very romantic!

Sara:

There were like three or four different Jewish girls marrying
Butler boys.

And they would say: “those smalltown boys have a lot of money!”
So I believed them!

And that was Fern Frelander who married Bernie Frelander, Joan
Leventhal who married Buddy Leventhal.

We were Pittsburgh girls, so
we came to Butler.

Herbie said:

“We’ve got to live with my mother, because
we just lost my father
a year or two ago.”

And so I moved in, and I lived
with his mother. And that’s how I
learned to cook.

His mother would call and say “what do you want for dinner?”

And then she’d say this and this and this,
And she’s say: “this is how you make it.”

So that’s how I learned to cook.

My parents didn’t know that I
was going to marry a person in
a marginal business!
I didn’t tell them.

I told him I was marrying a “fancy Pittsburgher
who wears a tux!”

PART TWO: THE STORE

Herbie:

My Father Had a Store

I was in the army the previous two years—
and in the second year I came home for
New Years and my father passed away while
I was home, so thus the store belonged to
my brother Lawrence and I.

The store was *Robin's Furniture*.
It was on New Castle Street in Butler, Pennsylvania.

I was born in New Castle— my grandfather Robins
had a furniture store there, and in this furniture store,
he had my father and two sons— one was named
Sam, and another son was called Irvin.

Then my mother, whose name was Gertrude,
married my father and his name was Irvin also—

so he had Sam and two Irvins in the store.

It Was Decided on Butler

It was right after the Depression and we were
starting to see light in the store and he decided

my grandfather was going to give Gertrude a store somewhere. We went to Beaver Falls, we went to Butler, we went to various different places... My grandfather was told what a wonderful town Butler was for business, because there was like 14 furniture stores in the town, and a multitude of jewelry stores— there was Pullman’s Standard Care Company, as well as Armco Steel.

And this was in an area where they remanufactured oil, such as Vaseline, and various different products around here, and Saturday night was the biggest night of the week, and the sidewalks were four across at that time, and they were full every Saturday night.

It was decided on Butler:

Robin’s Furniture Store.

My father ran the Butler store. He had two girls in the office, he had a finisher, he had two trucks— two men to run the truck— why he had two trucks I’ll never know... And he spent very little time in the store.

He as the type of person who liked to have his name in the headlines.

The store was located where the post office is right now. The building was at that time owned by two Jewish butchers— there was a butcher shop next door. Directly across the street— a company called May Stearns.

It had people out on the road selling, as a debit, such as:

“Mrs. Jones I’m going to sell you a rug, and you’ll be paying 50 cents a week, I can sell you a blanket for 75 cents a week.”

Now this was on the road: it was called a “debit.”

Robin’s furniture was directly across the street from this store.

We Owed, We Owed

Two days after my father passed away—
we went down to the store, walked in
with an accountant:

We owed everyone:
we owed the *Butler Eagle*, we owed rent— we
owed, we owed.

So then the question was:
What do we want to do now?
Are we close to bankruptcy?

There were 14 other furniture stores: There was May
Stearns, there was Davis Brothers, there was one across the
street where we are now...Linsky's, West Penn Furniture,
there was —14 around the area.

We had nothing, credit
was bad.
Things were really down to nothing so thus my
uncle—who had my grandfather's store
after my grandfather had passed away—

Uncle Irv in New Castle—
was married to Buella Jaffe—
went to us and said:

“I'll give you some furniture.
Bring it back there and you can do some business.”

We went to New Castle,
and he gave us the stuff out of his
warehouse— It was all dated furniture, stuff he
couldn't sell.

After about four or five trips to New Castle, with a truck—
we used to bring the furniture back and had a lady clean it up,
and put it on the store for display, and sell it, for which we
would pay him back.

We Could See the Light

Then he said to us:

“I can’t afford to do this all the time, because I don’t have enough credit to take care of two stores.

Why don’t you go to your uncle, Sam?”

Sam was in business with an Uncle in Meadville, Pennsylvania.

So we made arrangements to go to Meadville, and we used to bring furniture back from Meadville— then it was a billing situation.

Because the uncle that owned the Meadville store did not care for my father.

We didn’t think about going out of that business, because we could see light. We could see light. We were the first discount furniture store in Butler.

It took about five years for the light to start shining.

PART THREE: THE SYNAGOGUE Herbie

Butler to New Castle and Back Again

I went to high school here in Butler— got here in 1950. We belonged to the synagogue; my father was on cemetery committee. There was always an argument about the cemetery—

my father decided he was going to quit the Butler Synagogue— this was when I was much younger— and he joined New Castle,

and I had to go to New Castle to go to Sunday school.

My father took me to New Castle— I went to my grandparents' house on Saturday after the store closed.

I spent the night at my grandparents' house. I had an uncle who lived in New Castle, and he took me down to the synagogue,

There was always somebody at the synagogue to take me to the bus station.

I would take the three o'clock bus back to Butler.

By the time I got back to Butler it was already 5 o'clock. In the wintertime, the sun was gone, and I'd go back to school the following day.

So it was like seven days a week.

The Original Synagogue

The original Butler synagogue was on 5th Avenue—it was a long narrow building, with a bimah in the middle.

It had a balcony for the women, and the men sat downstairs. It was orthodox at that time.

They had two orthodox butchers.

They were probably 300 plus Jewish families.

Every store on Main Street was managed by a Jewish person.

The New Synagogue

They decided to build a new synagogue to get away from 5th Avenue, which was starting to deteriorate.

They bought a piece of ground where Armstrong Cable is now.

They bought a building there, which was an old home, and they converted it into a synagogue,

That was the second synagogue I can remember.

Then Nationwide Insurance came along and wanted that piece of property and they purchased it from the synagogue, and the synagogue was built where it is now.

They bought the ground from Brandan, an attorney, and he owned this nice big house.

They built onto that house cause they didn't want to destroy the house.

I was so busy in the store,
I didn't have time to be involved with the board.

I went to the new synagogue—absolutely!

At least once a year!

That's all that I could go.

Jews and the General Community

My father wanted to be known around
as “There goes Irv Grossman!”

He ran parades, he was a head man for parades,
he belonged to the Optimist Club, a big club in
town at that time, and did various different
civic things.

Jews tried to become associated with the general community— but
there was always an underlining of people who didn't want them.

My Father and the Masons

My father belonged to the consistory of the masons in New Castle, PA and he became a 32nd degree mason, and he wanted to become a 33rd, which is endowed on you for doing good deeds, etc.,

so he wanted to go into the Shriners, and become a 33rd, and there was always someone who was against him,

Such as—he was not allowed to belong to the Masons here in Butler, so he went to Johnstown.

He wrote them a check and they returned his check, and told him he “would have been blackballed”—

somebody in Butler had something against him.

Sara: On Synagogue Activities

On Jewish Women:

When I first came to town my mother said: “you have to join the Jewish National Woman, Hadassa, and you have to join Sisterhood.”

So that’s what I did!

I’m basically shy, but I didn’t have any problem in a new community.

Everyone was basically nice, and I had these few friends who I knew from Pittsburgh, who moved to Butler, too.

The Jewish women at that time included: Riva Avis, Edie Somolski was a big worker, ...Cohen, the Jaffies...

On Activities: The Dances

We always had a New Year's dance.

And we always had a dance after Yon Kippur, but then everyone would complain:
 'I have a headache, so I'm not coming to the dance.'

One year we had a square dance.
 We had a caller, and that was a lot of fun.
 And we had men and women's bowling.

Sometimes we had a big dance-- we called it the "Tri-County Dance," New Castle was in it, Beaver Falls, I think we did that every year.

On Youth Organizations:

Yes, the children were big in BBYO. One time they would go to New Castle, and they'd stay at different people's homes,

sometimes it was in Butler—
 it was all those small towns—
 they all had it, it was at least once a month.

The purpose of BBYO was to bring Jewish children together.
 A lot of the kids still have connections.

My son is in Atlanta, and there are
two or three children he met growing
up in BBYO or AZA.
He knows this people from way back.

One time they stayed in the synagogue overnight—
They slept on the floor,
And we had to make meals for them.

The kids had to go twice a week for Hebrew school, Sunday
school was once a week.
My older daughter's class, there were five or six, In
my other daughter Jill's class, the same amount., In
my son's class, there were a lot more.

Sara and Herbie: The Synagogue, Then and Now

Herbie:

As the older people died off or moved away, there
were no new people that came in—

Every time we got a new leader, a rabbi or
whatever we had, they would come along
with a different idea.
It didn't create a conflict with me,
As religious as I was then, As
religious as I am now.

There were conflicts in the synagogue at that time.
In the beginning when we first came to Butler. There
were always conflicts.
The money people who were in the synagogue
ran it to their liking.

But I don't think there was an animosity between
the richer and the poor Jews.

When we needed a minyan

we'd have to go Fifth Avenue for various different people,
pick them up and drive them to the synagogue so we'd
always have a minyan of ten people.

There was always a minyan around.

We called them the Minyanairs.

Sara:

When I first came here there were a lot of people
coming to the synagogue.

Today, there aren't that many people.

Herbie:

Today it's almost down to nothing.

Sara:

I go to synagogue because

I feel I should go and support the Cantor.

She takes the time to make a sermon every week

And she puts a lot into it—

As long as I can walk, I'll

be there.

Herbie:

We have a problem.

We can't go out and buy these people.

Churches as well as synagogue are having trouble with people coming.

It's not only us.

I have seen Beaver Falls gone,

Oil City is gone,

New Castle is gone, Sharon's

gone.

And all these places have a cemetery.

Sara:

I don't think the people care like

we used to care.

I don't know what caused the break.
 People say: "Well, I got my kid bar and bat mitzvah, I'm out of here." We
 see that happening all the time.

Look how many we had twenty years ago.
 We had a lot of bar and bat mitzvahs.
 People just didn't come back.
 That's all.

I think other interests—
 It was not important to them, I guess.

The major change took place, maybe
 twenty years ago.

Herbie:

We used to fill the synagogue
 on the High Holidays, Plus we
 had chairs in the back.

Then chairs in the back were not needed, so
 thus we filled the synagogue.

Now we have half the
 synagogue and we can't even fill
 that to make ten people.

People aren't moving in.
 When's the last time we had a new person?

When this cantor leaves, that
 will be the death, the end of
 what we have here.

Can we afford another cantor?
 Can we get a cantor that comes in like she does?
 Can we get a cantor that will stand on the pulpit and have a fresh talk for four people?

Time will tell.

Sara:

We'll be here.

**EVERY JEW IS A JEW IN THEIR OWN WAY: VIVIAN
PRUNIER AND ELLEN GARBUNY**

Vivian and Ellen are daughters of Melitta and Max Garbuny.

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Life Before Hitler	

Ellen:

For dad? it was a very affluent situation:
they had a cook, a live-in maid,
someone to watch the children; they
were upper crust, and that's the
extent of what I know.

Vivian:

Same thing for mom; that life was good until Hitler
came to town—totally secular; they would go on
skiing vacations in the Austrian Alps.
The schools would have skiing outings.

Staatenlos

Vivian:

Our father went to the technical college of Berlin, like MIT, and he got his degree in Physics, and he was one of the last Jews to be awarded a degree, and this was in 1937, I think, and the reason he was able to do that is that he was classified a *staatenlos* (a stateless person) rather than a Jew.

And the people in his physics department did not have a whole lot of respect for Nazis— they thought they were ignorant thugs, so it was sort of a game to shelter their Jewish students.

I don't know how many there were besides my father.

And every so often the SS would come sniffing around looking for Jews:

What about that Garbuny guy? they'd sniff:

Is he some sort of a Jew?"

Nahh...he's some sort of Hungarian.

Sniff, sniff..

The Oncoming Fear

Vivian:

Our parents left Austria because of the oncoming fear.
Everybody did.

Ellen:

Everyone who could, did. My uncle on
my dad's side orchestrated their
departure and then they brought their
parents over.

The Story of the Journey Over and Arrival in America

1. *The Anschluss Vivian:*

We know the story.

Hitler came into town.

The Anschluss— all the Nuremburg laws that took six years to go into place in Germany put into place in Austria; they knew in a matter of weeks the professional people were especially at risk of being separated from their families and communities, so my grandparents went into hiding “underground.” Mom was living in the big apartment with their Tante Frieda, a mousy little woman who gave piano lessons.

The younger children were sent to their grandmother.

They were sheltered there.

My grandparents arranged for passage for them to emigrate to Paris; they had family connections pretty high up.

My grandmother’s brother had a high position in the government.

The way Mom tells us, they were literally reunited at the train station in Vienna.

2. *Our Father’s Student Years*

Vivian:

He was a student when Hitler came to power and he was a graduate student during the early Nazi years.

And his brother was also a student.

Ellen:

His brother was more aware of the situation; Dad was oblivious.

3. *The Journey Over*

Vivian:

His brother was the one who lit the fire for the family to get out. My grandfather was trying to get exit papers to get the family into Soviet Russia, better than staying in Germany. They were able to get to the US first. In the early 20s, my grandfather called in a favor. He gave money to an employee for their passage to the U.S. That employee always said, "I'll pay you back, I'll pay you back," and my grandfather said: "I'll let you *know* when you can pay me back." This employee who owed my grandfather a favor was the one who wrote the affidavit for his sons.

4. *Our Father at Princeton*

Vivian:

Our father went to Princeton to be a post-doctoral candidate— that was work enough to satisfy the work requirements. He had to have all the papers in order to get out. That would have been 1938.

Dad was actually in Einstein's department. But I don't think Einstein had anything to do with my dad's actually getting there. His credentials were really quite good. He didn't have a working relationship with Einstein.

Ellen:

Though he did work with other famous physicists. He would have their books on his bookshelf and when he spent a year at the University of Rochester, we actually met some of these famous people. We thought they were just colleagues to him. They were just "the other kids' dads to me."

Vivian:

My dad moved from Princeton to New York. He was at the Institute for Advanced Studies—it was like a post-doctoral program—and he got a job at the Helen Bradley Company in Milwaukee. He was in Princeton for a year then he worked for Helen Bradley for two years, then he came to

Pittsburgh to work at Westinghouse. At some point after the war started, he was in New York visiting his parents. He must have used their address as his permanent address because he received a draft notice with orders to appear at Penn Station.

When he arrived he asked the sergeant in charge where

they were going. The sergeant said, "Fort Dix". My father asked if that was more than 50 miles from Manhattan and the sergeant said "yes."

My father said, "Well I'm an enemy alien and I am not allowed to travel more than 50 miles outside of Manhattan." The sergeant told him to get lost.

5. How they Met

Ellen:

Mom came over with her family; she was a teenager, and Dad was a full-grown man, so their experiences were different.

Vivian:

Their grandmothers were cousins, so it was an arranged meeting. My mother was 16. By then, my father's parents had come over, too, they were brought over in 1939.

What Did Your Father Do?

Ellen:

One of my favorite stories— I don't know if it applies, but...he was sitting... a friend of mine asked me what my dad did.

I remember my dad spent a lot of time just staring into space and writing notes. So I told my friend that and he said: "Oh, he's on relief!"

I had no idea what relief was, but when I told my parents that, they cracked up. I learned later on: never to ask my dad: "what are you thinking about?"
[sweeps her hand over her head]

Vivian:

When I was six, I asked him:
"Why is the sky blue?" He told me!
He explained Rayleigh's law. Something I did not understand until I went to graduate school.

A Value on Education

Ellen:

Our family was well educated, so
it was what we knew.
Our father typed a lot, he wrote several books.
And the background music of my life was
listening to the typewriter when I was going
to sleep.

Vivian:

It wasn't unusual. This was home. My
grandparents made it clear that high
achievement and performance was
necessary, was expected.

Ellen:

It's the least we could expect.

*

Vivian:

I knew all four of my grandparents. My
mother's father was born in a little town
Gloggnitz, south of Vienna.
My great grandmother perished in Terezinstadt— I'm
named for her. My grandmother was sent to Vienna
for schooling and he became a doctor. She lived there

until he had to emigrate; my mother's mother lived in what was Poland in 1895, educated in Moscow (almost unheard of for a Jew). She finished her education in Vienna after the Russian Revolution. She was a medical doctor, so they had a high degree of learning. My father's parents were not as well educated but they put a lot of value on it. Both sons earned PH.Ds.

Holocaust Survivors?

Vivian:

They were already out before Kristallnacht.

Ellen:

They didn't identify as "Holocaust survivors" because they got out before then.

They never talked to us about it.
We just absorbed it.

When we got together with my mother's sister and husband, they would sing songs (Nazi anthems), remember that?
But they never talked about it directly, ever.

Vivian:

Our middle sister, Carole, was able to extract some of it from our parents through a series of rather painful interviews over a period of years. About 15 or 20 years later Mom started talking about it.

The Holocaust Effect

Ellen:

Our mother would say:
“You can’t dress like that, Ellen,
you’ll get raped if you wear that.”

When they moved into New Haven condos, Dad
was experiencing some confusion.
They had a lot of trouble with the telephone
system. And dad would say: “Do you think it’s
because they know we’re Jewish that they’re giving
us this hard time with the phone system?”
I felt so bad; he just carried that, and mom carries those feelings still.

Our parents really took umbrage that the three daughters identified
that way.
I don’t know any other American Jewish people who
have my background,
who had parents who transmitted to their children
their intergenerational anxiety/depression that
the trauma they experienced gave us.

In America, You Don't Have to Worry

Ellen:

I don't think the attitude toward Jews before the Nazi takeover was good— we weren't told directly.

Here's how I kind of know what my dad's experience was like: In 9th grade there was a lot of protest in the US against the Vietnam war and I wore a black arm band and my dad got really upset about that:

“You don't know how good you have it. When I was your age, people threw stones at me because I was Jewish.
In America, you don't have to worry about that.”

My father wasn't happy about my protesting against the Vietnam war because partially he was working for the Defense Department. He was worried about how things appeared. It appeared as if I was out of control by wearing a black armband when I was in 9th Grade.

Superstitious Nonsense

Ellen:

My father was never very interested in Judaism and his family was quite secular. They looked at it, being scientists and wealthy, as a bunch of superstitious nonsense. It affected them because the people that practiced the superstitious nonsense were the target of a lot of hate.

Did Being in America Lessen Their Anxiety About Being Jewish?

Vivian and Ellen:

No.

Vivian:

It's biological.

We can explain it.

The stress-induced changes in our DNA are inheritable.

Our Childhood Jewish Experience in America

Vivian:

As Jews, we were so hidden in the US
that when my parents got a chance,
they moved to Penn Hills, because
there were almost no Jews.
They moved there because they were afraid to be near Jews.

We knew who the other Jewish families were, but
we weren't affiliated with a synagogue.
We went to something called:
The Pittsburgh School for Reform Judaism.
It was sort of an ad hoc thing put together by this lovely
woman—I think her name was Abrams—and when her
children finished the school, the school fell apart. We'd meet
on Sunday mornings. My father was one of the lecturers, and
it was as secular as you can be.
It was "Learning about Judaism"
The only song we learned was "Ein Keloheinu."
They moved there because they were afraid to be near Jews.

Ellen:

But then we moved to Churchill in 1965, and
we lived in the Golden Ghetto of Churchill, a
wealthier neighborhood. 95% of the
neighborhood were Jewish, and Vivian was
already in college, but I was in grade school, all
the Jewish kids knew each other, and they didn't
know me, because I didn't go to their
synagogue.
I had a very difficult time in grade school.
There was more Jewish inclusion for me.

All through grade school and high school, I wasn't the only kid who was Jewish, where, until 5th grade, I was. Whereas with Vivian, she was, throughout high school, the only Jewish kid.

Bareknuckling It

Vivian:

In Jr. High I ran into my first encounter with anti-Semitism. It upset me so I went and talked to my dad about it. I said, knowing the family across the street was Jewish and their son was going through bar mitzvah preparation,

I said: "If there's going to be prejudice against me, I want to know why and what am I being persecuted for. It's not fair to leave me ignorant, I want some facts."

So when I bareknuckled it, they did join Temple David in Monroeville, and I learned a little bit of Hebrew, got confirmed. And that began my attachment to Jewish people and Jewish ritual.

Our Mother's Complicated Reactions to Judaism

Ellen:

Mom said, when I got married to Don— who was Christian at the time— and I was not a practicing Jewish person:

“Don’t think this his will keep you safe.”

I knew what she meant.
You will always be outed as a Jew.
Don’t think his goyishe family will keep you safe.

Larry:

In other words, in a Yiddish dialect, “It couldn’t help.”

Vivian:

I had a different experience.
My second marriage was into a French-Canadian family in Massachusetts. My husband is one of eight. His sister married a Jewish man, and right before we got married, they had a baby. So when my mother arrived before the wedding, before she even greeted anybody else, my mother said: “I want to see the baby!”

She wanted to see what this French Canadian-Jewish cross was going to produce. And after the baby passed inspection, for the wedding was allowed to proceed!

Our Reaction

1. *An Act of Defiance*

Vivian:

My children are very well-versed in this.

The way that I responded to what happened to our family was:

“Ok, they destroyed our institutions; damnit, I’m going to build them back up.”

So I joined a conservative synagogue in Northern Virginia;

I helped found a Jewish preschool, and

then a couple years later,

I was one of the founding members of a Jewish day school, and all three of my children attended the Jewish day school through the 5th grade.

For me it was an act of defiance.

I owned my Judaism and it’s in your face.

2. *This Baby Is Jewish*

Ellen:

When I was pregnant with my first child— Don and I were practicing nothing— and that worked for us—to do nothing— and there was no pressure to do anything— but then my sister-in-law said my mother-in-law bought a christening gown and I was like—oh no, “this baby is Jewish”—I don’t know how to do this, but this baby is going to be Jewish,

so I got ahold of Rabbi Ben Yehuda at B’nai Abraham—

I had known him already—

he had mixed messages about my marriage—

but he agreed to name Emily in the synagogue— and my in-laws embraced having a Jewish grandchild, and in

1990, Don converted into Judaism, and Rabbi Walter taught me how to have a Jewish home.

He said, “If Don’s going to do this, you got to have a Jewish home.”

And I’m...What do I know about having a Jewish home? So we would do the sabbath cleaning every Friday, I would bake a challah, we’d light the candles— yadda, yadda.

Vivian took it much further than me— you do what you’re comfortable with— but my daughter Emily, who lives in Brussels, is giving her son a very nice Jewish education and is involved with the synagogue there.

I probably didn’t do it enough. My sisters would probably say we were not in it fully— but I did what I felt was enough for us.

When my son was 3 years old, in October, the teacher asked, “So what holiday is coming up, kids?” He said: “Yom Kippur!” And she was looking for “Columbus Day!”

After class, the teacher said to me: “I didn’t know you were Jewish,” and I said, “Why, because we didn’t have our gold star on?” Zack was quite comfortable with being Jewish at three years old.

Anti-Semitism in America

Vivian:

I won't go on record with what I want to do about it.

Ellen:

We all have restored Austrian citizenship. In 2020 Austria made a law that descendants of persecuted individuals can apply for Austrian citizenship. Emily drove this—Emily, me, her brother and their son—drove it, and you bet your bottom dollar that we have this very early on.

It's important for us to do that because:
if things go to hell here, I want to escape.

The irony is not lost on me that Austria's anti-Semitism led us to America, and I might have to flee to Europe because of it.

Every Jew is a Jew in Their Own Way

Ellen:

I had some issues at the synagogue—
not with anybody in my generation
but with some of the others—

that I wasn't having a Jewish enough household, just some
casual criticism; I just blew it off— I told myself to consider
the source, and move on... my experiences by and large were
positive with the synagogue.

I just didn't like services; I hate services.

And I don't see the point of them personally for me.

*

My son works with kayak.com and his
business took him on a trip to Katar; and
out of 200 people that were there, the four
Jewish people found each other.

And his girlfriend asked how could that happen, and
he said, well, there are subtle details:

maybe somebody saw the mezuzah on my neck, or
maybe it was a turn of phrase
but the four Jewish people found each other...

What Melitta Would Say

Vivian:

I think she'd agree with most of what we said. She didn't agree with the choices that I made, raising my kids. She thought it was terrible that I was sending my kids to a Jewish day school, and said there's a perfectly good public school to send them too.

Ellen:

She didn't like the mezuzah on the door because she thought that was advertising, and it wasn't until she was in her 80's that she could put a mezuzah on her door. She felt comfortable enough in the community and all three of her daughters felt the same ways.

Vivian:

And she was a member of Hadassah; she was active in that when she lived in Pittsburgh.

An Acolyte of Eleanor Roosevelt

Has our mother mellowed?
I think she's still processing it.
She was a mathematician, 20 years old,
working for the Pentagon, calculating the
trajectories of artillery shells.
She did a lot for the war effort; she was very proud of that.

She got a degree in Mathematics from Hunter College in NYC.
She graduated when the war started;
they put the women in that school in the accelerated program,
and she graduated a few days after her 20th birthday. She
taught math in the public schools in Pittsburgh and in
Rochester, and taught at Hillel academy in Pittsburgh.

When she first moved to Pittsburgh, she worked
for the Bureau of Mines as a statistician,
computing life expectancies of miners. The mining
companies said it was cheaper to pay the widows
than to improve mine safety.
She became adamantly pro-union.

Besides being an acolyte of Eleanor Roosevelt.

On Happiness

1. Was Your Mother?

Vivian and Ellen:

No!

Vivian:

Because of her background and her personality, she battles with depression and anxiety, and she's shy.

2. Are You Happy People?

Ellen:

I have happiness in moments; generally, I'm ok.

Vivian:

Me, too—I know happy feelings when I get them.

Ellen:

Yeah. We both have stable lives, we have kids who love us; grandchildren who adore us.

Vivian:

My grandson had his bar mitzvah just in time for my mother's 99th birthday. She was aware of it, and it was a REALLY big deal.

Very happy because of that.

Philip Terman: A QUALITY OF THE SOUL

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Chapter 1: A Wandering Jew

1. Walking

I wrote a poem about my earliest memory— you know how sometimes you remember something and you're not sure you remember it because— you're not sure why it stuck with you, and it seems like an impossible thing to remember, but I remember learning to walk. I remember— my mother picking up, putting me down, pushing me along, and my father, a few feet away, and I walked to my father.

Poem: "Walking"

My first walk is also my first memory—

On the purple carpet, in the living room
Of that bungalow in the suburbs built
For the soldiers who returned from the war.

One parent directed me towards the other,
Who waited with open arms,
Both of them smiling, encouraging,
My brothers on the stairway cheering. No,

I don't recall if there was music playing
Or if an uncle was filming that historic
Occasion, I couldn't tell you anything

About the Cold War outside or how

The country was about to collide
With itself—you wouldn't ask me then

About what would become of us:
One parent's exploding heart,
The other parent's vanishing mind,

My own trials and convictions— I
don't even remember if I made it
To the other side without falling:

The only thing I can say with certainty Is
that, between one parent and the other, I
somehow stumbled into my life.

1. Roberta Rose

Another memory that's early— my
mother taught me how to ride a bike.

I was about five, and it was a Schwinn, a
banana seat, a display model, so it was
cheaper— my father was always looking
for the deal!

We were on the sidewalk In
front of our house.
Roberta Rose—the Rose family—
lived about five houses up the street,
it was a suburban street lined with bungalows—

her parents were friends of my
parents, and I was friends of Roberta.
My mother would steady me as I
slowly pedaled, push me off, and I'd
fall, and she'd steady me again, push
me off, and I'd fall, until finally— I felt
her hands disappearing and I kept
riding up the sidewalk
and turned into Roberta Rose's driveway—

she was on the front porch, and I
believe I kissed her on the cheek, got
back on my bike, and rode back.

*

Poem: "Roberta Rose"

--remember those afternoons
When our mothers—Sylvia and Mildred— Took
us out to Corky and Lenny's

For cinnamon toast and chocolate milk? We
were ten and lived five houses away.
I wish I could remember more—

How you were taller than me,
And wore your dark hair in a ponytail
And when my mother taught me to ride

My huffy banana seat I pedaled
To your house and up your driveway And
I got off my bike and you stood On the
front porch pretending
To pour tea into a plastic cup and I
Bowed to you and got back

On my bike and rushed home.
Where are you now, Roberta Rose?
Does your cheek still recall my lips

The way a rose, after it's fallen
And become soil, recalls a spring dawn?
Let this poem be a rose, Roberta,

That I can present to you
For our lost childhoods, which
Are words that disappear

Into where our mothers sing.

Chapter 2: Millie and Joe

My parents were Clevelanders.
Both were born in the 20's,
children of Jewish immigrants,
lower-middle class. My mother
Millie was a nurse and a Hebrew
teacher. My father Joe a used car
salesman.

They met at a Jewish dance—
My mother's side I believe
Were scholars; my father's side were laborers.
I inherited the poetry gene from my mother,
Who wrote poems and stories,

But I wrote many poems about both of them—
 They represented two sides of Judaism—
 My mother the more religious side—
 A Synagogue Jew, and my father—
 The more working-class side— The
 Deli Jew. My poetry
 Has been inspired by both.

Poems, “Two Poems for My Mother”

1. Mouth to Mouth

At the pool, the drowning man saved, lying
 stock-still on the deck: suddenly, my mother
 loosens my grip and surges through the swarm
 of dripping suits and leans over his enormous
 body, tips his head to the side, pinches his
 nostrils—her chest tenses with air, she seals her
 mouth over his mouth and, like God breathing
 into Adam, releases all of her breath into this
 stranger, and I am full of anger and longing, and
 he gasps and spits, his eyes opening, the crowd
 stepping back and gawking at my mother, who is
 now hovering, and he rises.

2. My Mother Cuts My Hair

To save money, my mother leads me to
 the bathroom, sits me down on the
 toilet, flashes the rusty scissors in the
 dim light, The Honeymooners audible
 from the next room. She snips until I
 protest, then snips some more,
 sculpting me into the straight-A student,
 the boy that helps around the house, the
 boy she wants to be a mensch and
 marry a Jewish woman but doesn't
 forget his mother, building her a home
 for her declining years and, when the
 time comes, lights a candle and recites
 the kaddish once a year. Snip, snip, snip.

Poem: “A Prayer for Jackie Gleason”

The ultimate blue collar,
 The man you had to love
 Because his story was always

Too true. The time, for example,
 The mob had him convinced
 They were an insurance agency

And hired him to be manager
 Of the East Side District. We knew
 He wanted it all for Alice,

The Cuban cigar, The
 apartment on Park Avenue Ed
 Norton would envy.

And at the end of each little act
 Of stupidity, each scan for the life
 That would take him away

From the bus he drove
 For fourteen years, you had
 To forgive him, you just had to,

The way I had to forgive
 My father for not paying attention
 To the circumstances

Of my sadness,
 When he'd come home, scrub
 His hands as if he could wash

The day out of them, and turn on,
 Louder than conversation,
The Honeymooners, a re-run he'd seen

So often he'd mouth the words: *To
 the moon, Alice! To the moon!*
 Cramden's fat fist punching

His own fat hand,

My father's fat fist
Punching his own fat hand.

Last night, long distance,
He'd only say: *Ralph died.*
Sunday afternoons,

We'd drive to look at houses
In wealthier neighborhoods,
Beechwood and Shaker Heights,

But he never closed a deal.
What do I need a new house for?
I got one right here, spreading

The herring soaked in wine sauce
On stale buttered rye bread
And pouring slowly into a coffee cup

A thimbleful of scotch—
JB: *Joe's Booze*, he'd call it,
After himself, so I thought

It was his, and therefore mine. Slouched
against the sink,
He'd gulp it down, then chant,

The way the Great One
Wished us good night, lips
Puckered into a kiss: *smoooothe!*

Chapter 3: Abraham and Paula, Nathan and Gusty

1. Abraham and Paula

My parents' parents came from the Ukraine and Poland.
I write about all this in my poetry, as it's something I've
always been interested in, the genealogy, the ancestral
background.

My grandfather on my dad's side, Abraham, came over in 1905.
I looked it up on the Ellis Island website.

I wrote a poem about his journey from Mogilov, Russia.
He was in steerage. You can order a photo of the ship they came in
on, which I did, and his ship was called the Bulgaria. He was 19.
Apparently, he came alone.

His name was spelled with two 'm's.' *Termann*—a
German word, my ancestors must have come to
Russia from Germany; so many of us Jews are
Germanic, Ashkenazi Jews. Abraham went to
Cleveland—

I'm not sure why; that's as far as I know about it.
He was a carpenter—he built houses, and then, he
injured his leg. There are two stories: my father
says Abraham got hit by a trolley car. My Uncle Hy
said it was a salami truck. In any case, he couldn't
walk, or work, and the family—there were six
kids—it was during the Depression-- became very
poor— my father used to say: they “moved with
the rent.”

Poem: “Photograph of the Ship Bulgaria”

Even in this blurred photocopy
it stretches itself, all 517 feet
and 10, 237 tons, across anonymous

waters, looming its black length not
far off shore where a few
thumb-sized figures, in early-

century fedoras and babushkas,
stare from the unsteady planks
of a pier, awaiting its arrival.

It swallows up the air with its steam
quadruple expansion engines,
speeding at twelve and a half knots.

Constructed for the Hamburg-
American line, it somehow survived a
hurricane, conveying

its 2700 passengers across the
Atlantic until it was sold, laid-up
and seized, refitted and transferred,

laid-up again and ultimately scrapped.
Though here it is, still intact, 1906,
and I'm squinting to locate

where it is my grandfather,
Abraham—commanded to flee out of
the scourge and oncoming affliction,

to depart his father's house in Mobilev, Belarus
and make himself a great nation
on Kinsman Avenue near the small *shul*

in the Jewish section of Cleveland, Ohio—
sits smoking among the third-class steerage.
For now he's twenty-three and single,

so indiscernible in the bulk's enormity that
I have to take his passage on faith,
more than a century between us, distant

and firm as the few feet separating him
from the unfathomable waters this hulk
navigates, from the dark history

of his annihilation. He dropped one
letter from his name and became
a carpenter and built his requisite alter

in the form of great house and sons and
daughters until he was stricken down by
a streetcar and bedridden

and carried from one paralyzed apartment
to the next, just ahead of the rent.
Did he know his own seed to be

numbered as the dust? Did he look up from
his crippled bed at the open sky
above downtown and count the stars and believe

that he, too, was among the chosen?

I don't know how Abraham met my grandmother,
whose name was Paula. I'm named after Paula—
because in the Ashkenazi Jewish tradition, you're
named after the most recently deceased person. She
passed away a couple of years before I was born and I
was named: *Philip*, because of the *P*, her namesake.

*

Poem: "My Father's Mother"

There she is with my father, The
only portrait of the two of them,
Holding each other, perhaps dancing.

My father is a grown man already, Handsome
in black suit, before
He gained the weight, lost the hair.

She's smiling but old, having birthed
Six children, her husband in a wheelchair,
Moving from place to place to place

And that's all I know about her,
Except her name, beginning with. P,
Same as mine, no coincidence,

I'm her namesake, the next child born,

Her replacement. My father never spoke of her,
Only that they were poor, and maybe

That's why, or maybe he thought
I wouldn't be interested in the dead,
Or maybe the past is too many griefs,

Which are our real ancestors after all,
Our chromosomes are filled with them,
That look and smile like us, answer

To our names. But we long for a hairpin,
A shawl stained with overuse and mold,
A letter, a torn phrase from her hand: *Yussek,*

Please, will you pick me up a little milk?,
So from this scanty evidence we can note The
details and make up the rest:

Cleveland, East 73rd and Templet, first floor
Apartment, she's breastfeeding my father,
The last one, her hair undone, shouting,

Half-English, half-Yiddish, to my grandfather,
Who yells from the next room for some herring
And whiskey, the infant making toothmarks

In her delicate skin, she will be up all night,
And the Depression—I, too, need her- To
dance, stranger, flesh of my flesh.

*

2. Nathan and Gusty

The only grandparent I knew was my Bubbie on my mother's side—
Gusty Bilfield. She's from a shtetl near Kiev, in the Pale of Russia
and she lived with us after my grandfather—Nathan his name was—
passed away. He was a junkdealer, and then he sold fruit. Like so
many immigrants, they had to struggle, couldn't afford to buy the
house they rented in East Cleveland. She represented the Old World
to me. She was an observant Jew,

And deaf. We spent a lot of time together, as she watched me
 When my mother worked as a nurse. She lived for several years
 In a room upstairs, and I remember she was always cleaning.
 The only image I have of my grandfather Nathan Is a photo in
 which he's holding me as a baby.
 In those photos of my grandparents they always looked old,
 But they were no doubt younger than I am now.

*

POEMS: GRANDFATHER NATHAN, GRANDMOTHER GUSTY BILFIELD

1: Poem, "Pa"

The grandfather my mother
 Called *Pa* I never knew,
 Though here's a picture of him
 Holding me on the front porch
 Of his rented duplex, looking
 Down on my infant body with
 His immigrant eyes, singing
 In his Yiddish tongue songs
 He must have learned
 In the shtetl that was Poland,
 Then Russia, then Poland again,
 Resting before returning
 To his scrap cart hooked up
 To his one-eyed horse or was it
 Rather when he sold fruit,
 weighing it on the scale that
 now hangs from the same worn
 rope and rusty chains in our
 kitchen, still cradling apples and
 orange and bananas? Did he
 measure what he earned To
 assure my future?
 Is he whispering into my ear
 That I won't have much
 To remember him by
 But I should grow up
 To be a *mensch* and take care
 Of his daughter, my mother?
Nathon: forgive my poor attempt

To transform your dust
 Into these inadequate
 Words. All I have is this
 Curled and creased photo,
 Your suspenders loose
 Over your wrinkled shirt,
 Your peasant's cap tipped
 To one side, your mouth
 Grimacing at my attempt To
 capture anything at all who
 you are and what You might
 leave me with— Except, in
 the nursing home,
 My mother mistook me
 For you, and called me *Pa*.

3. Poem, *Bubbie*

*I'm from the old country, you used
 to say, you used to say, I just
 missed the Titanic.
 I eat mustard from the jar.*

Hunchbacked, you pedaled fruit
 through the Depression streets
 of Cleveland's Jewish section.
 Once, because you drifted back
 to the *pogrom* where cloth covered
 the windows and your father
 recited sacred
 words before work—the *t'fillin*

wrapped so tight around his arm
 you feared the blood would burst—
 and, in the kitchen, leaning into her
 own formlessness,

your mother kneaded the dough
 that would gather in clumps
 along her lifelines, you slipped on
 the ice and lost your hearing.

I called you *Bubbie*.

We had our own sign language: a
nod, a wave of my hand
when I was hungry. Soon, you forgot

how old you were, sitting in a
corner, hearing aid off,
speaking Yiddish in your
head,
sewing who knows what, a sweater,

with wings for an angel.

Chapter 4: La' Dor Vador

1 The Portraits

I actually interviewed my mother, wanting to know more about her life, her childhood, her growing up. She pointed to the framed photographs Of her grandparents hanging in the

living room-- they never came over, But
somehow the portraits did.

I was attracted to these portraits because they were over
a hundred years old in these beautiful oval frames, so I
asked her about them, and if she remembered anything
about her grandparents.

My mother was very Jewish.
We were conservative Jews.
Her grandparents especially were more observant,
as these portraits revealed,
and my grandmother, Gusty, and my mother, Mildred
inherited the observant tradition, so I always associated
my ancestors and childhood with being Jewish, and my
whole life with being Jewish.

I interviewed my mother because I wanted to
write a poem about her and her background, so I
asked her questions, and recorded the
conversation. I asked her: how Jewish did you
feel? She responded: "We breathed. We were
Jewish." It was as natural as breathing.
And she spoke about the portraits.

*

Poem: "What We Pass On"

The story my mother tells me about her
grandparents Shmu-el and Malka: their
portraits hang on the wall.

Shmu-el: gray streaks in a beard that
bunches past his white collar,
the black coat of the peasant

and the black square hat because
wherever he was he was in the
House of God.

His eyes stare into the future
as if it were an obligation.
And the other, Malka, for whom

my mother was named: Malka,
Mildred—
the first letter of the most recent dead

passes on, the rest of the name
we fill in for ourselves—so what
is left of us is an initial, one capital

letter, a sound signifying human to
remind us that we are spelled out
of those who came before—

Malka, sad-faced, babushka wrapped
around thin hair, looped
across tired breasts, the forehead

wrinkled and around the eyes
marks of claws, pupils staring
in slightly different directions,

the right tilted upward signaling worship,
the left off to the side
signaling caution and there's something—

these figures, inside their original frames, sketched
in pencil and charcoal,
dusted with one-hundred-year-old light,

something, not in the noses or chins, the
mouths fixed as if the barest smile,
a grin would be an effort—but something

in my mother's voice: *Shmuel was
an elder—I have it written down
somenhere—and the Germans*

*lined him up and they shot him
and Malka came across with a son
they discovered to be tubercular
so the officials at Ellis Island
wouldn't let him in.*

*Imagine— she left these
portraits with a relative*

*and made the long journey back so the
son shouldn't make the trip alone,
coughing up blood, both disappearing*

*on the other side of the waters in the
country of hardship, but where— we
can only guess. My mother's eyes*

turn and look into mine: *Yes—
her head nods to the rhythm of
the clock moaning: we can guess.*

*

2 Inheriting the Wrestling

Because my mother wanted to preserve her parents and grandparents' tradition, we observed a lot of the conservative practices, —we kept kosher, we lit the Friday night candles and said the blessings and I went to Hebrew school. I was bar mitzvahed, I was confirmed. My mother was a Hebrew teacher, so that was the center of her life, And we went to Israel a couple times. The whole milieu was Jewish.

*

Poem: "At the Wailing Wall"

And that last night, after everyone
In the hotel fell asleep, my mother
Let me down the rough stones,
Whitened by stars so close

We could touch them, to the square
In front of the Old Temple. She wrote
Her message on a scrap of paper,
Placed it in a fissure with thousands

Of others, forced it in tight
 And hope it stayed. My spirit,
 She whispered, you write one, too.
 The cracks were crammed

With petitions folded and packed in,
 Sealing the stones with pleadings
 In that. Puzzle of boulders caulked
 With tears and words and breath

Whispered into the crevices.
 We'd passed through the checkpoints,
 Our bags searched, our bodies
 Scanned and measured and judged

For that fragment, that chamber
 Of the original heart, that constellation
 Of oddly shaped stars fixed
 In our shared sky, that calendar

That holds all our next years.
 A flock of black-robed figures
 Requested us to follow them
 Down the stone steps into

A sanctuary beneath the wall,
 Thrusting shadows of books, pulsing
 Birds, into our quivering palms,
 Their eyes penetrating our flesh,

An obscure longing for us to take up
 Their responsive chanting, in that place Her
 tongue spoke all her life with promise, In
 that language she blessed me in.

*

Judaism was an important part of my life, and it still
 is. We lived in a Jewish neighborhood— A Jewish
 school—elementary school was 95% Jewish, the
 suburb was Jewish, All my friends were Jewish.
 Sometimes I rebelled against it, and I still do,
 The authoritativeness of it, the rules— you

can't have a milkshake with a hamburger—
 there's a lot of rules you can break! But more
 seriously, I always loved being Jewish because it
 allowed me to question God, to debate with
 God— there's precedent in the Bible, our
 biblical heroes questioning. After all, the name
 "Israel"

means "to wrestle." I think
 wrestling with God is at the core
 of spirituality, of growth, another
 quality of the soul, like the way
 Abraham questioned God about
 his decision to destroy the cities of
 Sodom and Gomorrah.

*

Poem: "The Only Innocent in Sodom"

And he said, "Let not my Lord be angry if I speak but this time: what if ten
 Should be found there? And He answered, "I will not destroy, for the sake of ten."

But what if there are less than ten,
 What if there were nine, eight,
 Seven, six, five, four, three, two—

What if there were one innocent soul?

But the Lord finished speaking,
 And departed, and even Abraham,
 Who—though but dust and ashes— Spoke
 up for the rest—departed,

For less than ten isn't enough.

And if you happen to be of that group,
 So obscure even the Lord departs, Even
 the righteous Abraham returns To his
 place, you can scream:

What about for the sake of the few?

Is a whole city of sin save for one

*Not worth saving, or shall we burn
The uncorrupted, too? I felt*

That way once, more than once,
The only one to speak up against
Everyone else, yet what I said
Was singularly mine, and true,
And therefore holy, and innocent,

The only innocent in Sodom.

*

I didn't feel much anti-Semitism personally, but, of course, you hear the stories. In Hebrew school we saw the films and I knew about it intellectually, and my parents were very sensitive to anti-Semitism, they grew up during the Depression and the War-- they experienced anti-Semitic incidents— but I was so cloistered.

Of course, I knew about the history of anti-Semitism, which I gradually learned more about, and I'm aware of the many anti-Semitic incidents that are still occurring. Our trip to Israel was a real education for me, for many reasons, especially how the Holocaust was such an essential tragedy that greatly inspired my parents' generation's fervor to preserve Judaism through their way of life, educating their children through Hebrew school, getting bat mitzvahed, and continuing the tradition onto the next generations— *l' dor-vador*.

*

Poem: "Children's Holocaust Museum"

Jerusalem

Absolute black, a theater
Before the screen flashes—
You negotiate the narrow Hallway,
one hand trembling on the railing,
the other held out to avoid
accident- then: one candle, two, a

few more, the way as the night
 darkens a first stars will clarify—
 the more you look, the more appear
 until the sky is full of them, a
 universe of candles spread out in
 each direction, and you are its
 center. It must be done with
 mirrors-
 A building this small can not contain
 so much light,
 And you come to understand:
 One and a half million
 Out of six, this you knew, but
 How many millions from these, And
 those again, countless.

Poem: "Planting Trees"

In Hebrew school,
 On the teacher's desk, The blue
 and white tzedakah box,
 Its map of the holy land beside the words:
 "Your direct link to the land of Israel."
 Between the aleph and the bet, We're
 told to slip our loose change Into the
 slot.
 We're planting trees.
 How many will I own
 A few for my birth,
 A few for my manhood,
 A few for my marriage,
 A few for my death. A
 small forest
 In a country they say is mine.

CHAPTER 5: Portrait of a Jewish Poet as a Young Man

I started writing poetry when I was very young. A good question to ask me is: when did I start writing poetry, because it's so integral to who I really am, and my Judaism.

And that started early on.

I wrote my mother a poem when I was 5— It was very simple, but from that point, poetry was—my thing.

From my experience and the people I know I don't think it's unusual for someone to latch on to something that becomes a lifelong activity— you kind of have to be obsessive to pursue a discipline that deeply. Other people latch on to other things, like the arts, or science, or cars or—radio!

Certainly, that's true in my family: we
 children were four sons, each of us a
 doctor in their chosen field.
 My three brothers went into the sciences.
 I'm the black sheep! I latched
 onto poetry right then, and
 never left it.

My mother wrote poetry and stories, and she
 was the one who'd read a special poem
 she wrote at bar mitzvah's, weddings...

It's clear that I inherited the poetry gene—from her.

*

Poem: "My Mother's Poems"

She'd recite them anywhere, to anyone, at
 weddings and bar mitzvahs—

she was the one who stood up
 in the middle of the meal and read

her rhymed verse, in honor and praise, filled
 with old wisdom and good humor,

or, if there was no formal occasion,
 over the phone, asking if I'd minded,

what did I think of them and where can
 she get them published—

tales about her father selling apples
 behind his one-eyed horse through

the Depression streets of Jewish
 Cleveland, or of her mother

washing clothes by hand, drying
 them on the line.

As a child I'd watch her type

at the long desk in the den, pages

and pages she'd gather neatly
in little bundles, punch three holes

in their left margins and clasp them
together inside a cardboard folder.

She'd make a drawing for the cover,
give the collection a name and store it

in the bottom drawer with the others, I
hear her voice asking me if she can read

Her latest, and I listen for that sweet voice that
spoke poetry—hers, and mine.

*

I've continued to write poetry ever since.
I could show you my notebooks
And you would find dozens, That
I still keep adding to.

I wrote through high school and into college-- I
thought, well, can I *major* in writing poetry?
I picked Philosophy—now that's really practical! The
only philosophy course that was required
for the major was Symbolic Logic...

So I sat in one day of the Logic course and
I said, "this is not for me!" Too logical!
If A and B equals C ...oy!
I heard there was a big macher teaching the poetry
writing class, a famous poet, who won big awards. I
had been writing what I thought were "poems" for so
long, I shied away from formal training, thinking it
would take away my independent creativity.

But I switched into his class, and that
was it, that was my introduction into the
academic creative writing world.

I always wrote naturally because I loved it, and needed to do it; for whatever reasons it wasn't something I thought I could do as a career, I didn't think in those terms. It was out of inner necessity.

Like so many others of my generation, I listened to a lot of music, especially attuned to the lyrics: Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell and all those wonderful songwriters where the lyrics mattered.

And then I started actually reading real poets, Frost, Whitman, Dickinson...

My family took a trip to Israel when I was a freshman in college, during the winter break,

and the first poem I wrote that came out of that poetry workshop that I think was a "serious" or—rather, "academic" poem—I was writing all those other poems when I was younger, rhymed and raw, how I was feeling at the time...

And I wrote a poem in that workshop Instructed by the famous poet, about that family trip to Israel, and I mentioned Masada--the mountain where 960 Jews took their own lives—

And a kid in the class said—we were critiquing— this is what we do, we take our knives out and we dissect them—and this kid said,

"This poet should explain what Masada is in the poem, a lot of people don't understand what that is—"

And that big macher poet responded:
 "You're not supposed to *explain* things in a poem.
 When this poem appears in the *Norton Anthology*" --
 which is a famous poetry anthology
 that publishes the most famous poets--

"there will be a footnote at the bottom of the page explaining it—"

And that went *right* to my head.

Poem: "Israel"

We travel past hurriedly, comfortable
in our tour bus, behind sunglasses and
cameras, curious about the F-15s
making designs in the sky.

But aged men and women kneel face down,
kiss the ground in worship. Secrets are on
their lips and now they can rest
where a promise is kept,

inside the stones of antiquity,
among the ruins of amphitheaters,
along the streets of Jerusalem,
where tear-stained prayers

add another layer to the Wailing Wall, where
orthodox request them to join *minyan*. We
need no reminder that this is no museum,
as orange trees emerge: they ripen

generation upon generation, or look down
on Masada from an advantageous cable-
car where it's easy to imagine 960 Jews
bury themselves with one Torah.

And that last evening in Haifa,
city above the Mediterranean, a
rainbow formed while hail fell
like manna through a halo.

CHAPTER 6: The Last of the Hippies

Was I a hippie?
Well, according to my father—I was!

He would look at my long hair,
my jeans, and call me “The
last of the Hippies”!

But that’s such a general term.
It could mean a lot of things.
I wouldn’t say I was extreme.

I grew up in the 70s, and so
not as ‘wild’ as the 60’s.

We were more practical and settled, less
political, but I always steered
towards the 60’s spirit,

The music and literature and art,
the political awareness, the freedom
to think beyond closed barriers of
philosophy and religion, exploring
alternative concepts.

In fact, what I consider to be my
first *poem*—and it became a song, as
my brother put it to music—was
called, in the 60’s style,
“Brotherhood,” written when I was
11 yers old! And I can still
remember the words:

*

Poem: “Brotherhood”

Peace and brotherhood,
That is good, that is good.
Why? Do people fight and die? In
a war? What for?
It doesn’t matter
What they wear

Or the length of their hair
 Who cares?
 It doesn't matter
 If they're black or white— That's
 right.
 That's what I like.
 Peace will increase
 While hate will abate. (my older brother came up with that word!)
 It doesn't matter
 What they wear
 Or the length of their hair
 Who cares?
 It doesn't matter If
 they're black or white
 That's right.
 That's what I like!

*

And, as I became older, I gravitated toward the 60's spirit of asking questions, and there was still a 'generation gap' in the sense that my parents, though politically liberal, were more conservative, having been raised in the Depression, knowing what it was like to do without, more practical, especially my father, who wanted me to take over his used car lot. He knew what it was like to struggle financially. I wrote a lot of poems about my father's used car lot—when I was a kid I 'worked' there, and it was probably natural that we would have our—disputes, him being focused on the business and me—well, a totally impractical poet.

And for him, as I say, I was "the last of the Hippies."

In a way, I did "inherit" my father's used car lot in the sense that, while I certainly didn't "take it over," it became the subject of one of my best poems, the first poem to get published in one of the best international journals, *The Kenyon Review*.

*

POEM: "The Last of the Hippies" from "The Used Car Lot" (a prose poem)

The Last of the Hippies

Jesse the bodyman, a pimp on the side, makes the cars hum, in the greasy garage, windowless, tires stacked to the tilting point, country music blasting from the transistor, the toilet backed up, *Playboy* centerfolds shaping the dust, tools haphazard on the cracked-cement floor.

“Get you any woman you want,” he says, but, seventeen, I sneak phone calls to my girlfriend or lay on the black vinyl couch reading *The Brothers Karamozov*, my father shuffling through car tiles on his desk: “Go watch Jesse,” he’d say. “You might learn something.” Having business at the bank, he puts me in charge, shows me a list with two columns scrawled in pencil, one marked “preferred price” and the other “lowest we’ll go.”

“Back in a few minutes,” and no sooner he’s out the door, he pauses: “If you get any customers, try to hold them until I get back. Stall them— show them around, start a few cars.” Humid afternoon, air all haze, trash stench from the next door’s McDonald’s, Euclid Avenue screaming, one way downtown, one way the suburbs—my spirit sweating to escape and Fyodor Karamozov murdered just as my customer arrives, all muscle and mirror sunglasses: “I want the Ford in back.” My father told me stories about criminals on the lam who would need cars in a hurry. He didn’t mind: “they always pay up front, cash.” As usual, this junker needs a charge-up: the man twitches, Jesse wheels the gigantic battery charger over, cracks the hood, tightens the wires—it juices right up, and I feel the damp of hundreds and fifties. The customer peels out like a drag racer.

My first sale! This long-haired distracted son my father calls: *the last of the hippies* is worthy, and the old man will be proud; he is, he pats me on the back, offers me a cigar, claims in a puff of smoke I’ll inherit the business yet, demonstrates the most important sales tactic: “if a customer looks at a car, don’t approach immediately. If he bickers with the price, look him in the eyes and walk away, just walk away,” straightening himself by way of demonstration as my customer returns, streaming as the hot sidewalks, blood-faced, pounding his fist on the desk, demanding back his money—he turned the engine off and it won’t restart.

My father doesn’t look up, cocksure: “Sorry sir, we sell our cars as is.” I bury my nose deep into the ravings of Ivan Karamazov to the Grand Inquisitor. “This box here,” my father mutters, staring at the form a second too long. “Well, I see it isn’t checked.” He points at me: “He sold you the car didn’t he? Well, look at him.” Both glare as they would a disobedient dog. “He doesn’t know nothing.”

Later, at home over dinner, my father snips sharply: “How can you be such *meshuggener*?”
What do you want to *be*, anyway?”

“A writer and a teacher,” I blurt out.

“I’m glad,” he fires back, biting down on his steak as if it was the word and not the piece of meat he was ferociously chewing, “you didn’t say: *poet*.”

*

After I left home to go to college,
I was exposed to other things besides Judaism;
I majored in Philosophy, read about
Buddhism, Christianity, Atheism, . . .
I was more open because there’s a
big world out there, and Judaism is
part of it.

I never stopped at the core of being Jewish— I don’t
even know what it means—to be one thing— we’re

human beings fundamentally and Judaism, like
 anything else
 is a label and a lifestyle that one participates in or not and cares about
 it or not or is attracted to some things about it and not other things
 about it....

My whole life before college was steeped in Judaism, but
 sometimes I came to question it, too.
 For example, at my confirmation,
 I read a poem, and this is in 12th grade,
 it was called "Jerusalem Calls,"
 I was very upset about the Judaism-Palestinian conflict and
 my poem went; "Jerusalem calls, Jerusalem calls/
 Listen if you can tear down those walls..."

I thought there was a wall between the Arabs and the Jews,
 And they needed to talk, a they needed to make peace, so I
 was a critic of Israel to a large extent.

Yet on the other hand I loved the stories of the bible,
 the poetry of the bible, the figures of the bible...
 Jewish writing, Jewish writers, yet a lot of Jewish
 writers critique Israel, too, and still are Jewish...

I can critique America as well—

You can critique the things you care about.
 To try to make it better.

Call it the 60's spirit.

*

My parents were democrats, but more
 conservative. Living through the
 Depression, children of immigrants, they
 were aware of that struggle to survive
 economically. And, of course, anti-
 Semitism and the Holocaust was ever-
 present in their minds, So they were
 naturally more practical, more financially
 aware, and, like so many of their milieu,
 provided a solid middle-class life,
 including a good education, which taught

us, the next generation. of the inequities
of the country, and we could afford the
time to listen to music, read poetry, and
protest.

*

Poem: "As They Were Able"

No revolutions occurred on 4073 Wyncote Road.
Our father, a sergeant third class in the Great War, our
mother, trained to be a military nurse—

they weren't hip to Kerouac and they didn't dig Kesey.
They weren't enlightened by the New Left and didn't
turn in, turn on, or drop out—no,

not in their brown-with-yellow-trim bungalow, with
their Humperdinck, their plastic-covered couch and
used Cadillac, and my father's Masonic Lodge

and our mother's mahjong—it wasn't for them, the
march on Washington. They kept appointments,
fulfilled the obligations to their ancestors, followed

the commandments of their God as they were able,
working and saving and whispering about cousins we
never met—they counted themselves lucky,

kibitzing on the front porch with neighbors, planting in
the backyard their tomatoes and cucumbers, relaxing in
the den our father built, watching Sullivan

and Cronkite—they saluted the flag, said
their allegiance—even as the city burned,
even as their children turned away.

CHAPTER 7: Meeting Ganya

After I received my PhD in English from Ohio State University, I taught at Iowa State for three years, then I got a job at Clarion University, where I taught at the branch campus in Oil City and I loved it. Many of the students were older, “returning adult students,” they were called.

The city was in terrible condition,
 a bad economic state. A lot of
 students needed to retool because
 they got laid off-- Quaker state
 left, Pennzoil left,
 And they had a lot to write about---

*

POEM: “Oil City Serenade”

I want to sing to you, Oil City, home of artist Butch Quinn
 who is drinking a beer at midnight and drawing figures on
 canvas with cigarette ash—muralist of refrigerators dumped
 into the woods, the artist of logs left by the saw-mill, you’ll
 find him at The Brass Rail ogling the single mothers back in

college, abused and abandoned, their exes steal their tires and crosswire their engines: town of despair, let's paint you gray, let's shimmy on down to the dollar store where on the racks are the royal robes worn by every citizen. Let's sing the laid-off song, the downsize song, the song that says we're going south, sorry, let's sing the welfare romp. Let's do Jake's Antiques, the old men behind the counter sitting on torn leather chairs and smoking, staring out of the dusty window at the line forming in front of the Pennsylvania Lottery—one of them a few years back actually won big, and has been in and out of jail ever since—let's collect lottery tickets and beer caps and cigarette butts and the smoke that floats through the air. Let's open an account of what we've lost: Quaker State, Continental Can, Pittsburgh Steel, all of the hospital but the Mental Health Unit, let's line up all the Prozac pills like coins along the Petroleum Bridge and offer our naked bodies to the telemarketing companies and Wal-Mart.

Once we were a city of Rockefellers.

Once we bled our earth of its sweet juices. Let's walk down to where the water cuts the town in half, shielded from the sharp beams of Route 8 that glow like searchlights now that dusk seeped beyond the hills steep as walls pushed back against boarded-up buildings and dead-end streets. Smell grease in the air, chemicals floating like wounded birds from the one refinery left, and if that goes, we're done.

*

I started a literary journal there and a performance space where people could come and read poetry and play music. I discovered that there was a group inspired by the *Utne Reader*, a cultural magazine which encouraged people to start salons so folks who wished to talk about cultural, political, artistic subjects could gather and share in discussion groups.

There was a salon in the Grove City area and some of my colleagues were part of it.

We were living in a rural area

And didn't have the urban museum, bookstores, coffee shops, so this group attempted to fill in the gap.

I received a letter from a woman named Chris saying
that the salon was going to be at her house and she
was going to make a Middle Eastern buffet and
show a Japanese movie—

And I was living in Oil City!

I said “a Middle Eastern buffet!”—a “Japanese film”!
I RSVP’d and I asked if she was really making middle eastern food
And she said, “yeah, I’m making the pita bread right now.”

I thought, “wow, a woman that makes her own pita bread!”

So on January 21, 1992, I drove out of Oil City, which
is surrounded by hills,
and made my way into a rural area, to Scrubgrass Road, Searching
for what she described as a “red-brick schoolhouse.”
Snow was falling lightly as I ascended up a small hill,
At the top of which sat the white church she described
As being across the road from her schoolhouse home.
It was a classic, beautiful winter scene..
I knocked at the front door.
She opened it I said, perhaps a bit too loudly--
“Hi! My name is...” and she shut me up right
then because someone was playing Bach on the
guitar.

I went in and there were people sitting around
eating Middle Eastern food, listening to the
guitar.

There were grape leaves and hummis
And a stack of pita bread on the table.

It was heaven as far as I could see...

It was a one room schoolhouse
Built in 1884—the date is above the door.

I went ahead and made a fool of
myself and made her dinner and, well,
one thing leading to another...

I moved in after about a year.

*

Chris had always been attracted to Judaism— the spirituality, the traditions, the culture, particularly the literature and the cuisine— Chris is extraordinarily respected as a gardener and cook— and she made the decision to convert to Judaism.

We searched for a synagogue, and visited B'nai Abraham.

As we were walking around it, a man came out and approached us And introduced himself: Walter Boninger! He was such a nice and welcoming man— we checked out a service and—after a while of discussing the subject--Chris decided to convert.

Rabbi Boninger worked with her, and Chris had her mikvah in Cleveland— It was a beautiful experience. And, because Chris was well-known For her extraordinary garden, her Hebrew name became the word for “garden”: *Ganya*.

*

Poem, from “For Ganya”

Hebrew for garden. The wise say to take another name and hide it from everyone so that God can call us in the night. You chose yours out of your calling, Scrubgrass Road, Venango County, Pennsylvania, across from the Amity Church and its cemetery, where the road rises and gives the land its southern slope, so what grows will be first to bud and last to frost.

Out of your life study, your real work, your daily art, waking and sleeping, your thoughts and blood attending to each season, rising in the first light, resting with the dark, daylight animal, dream animal. Off Old Route 8, between

Clintonville and Mercer, Grove City and Franklin, what the rural postal carrier calls *The Lord's Protected*.

Under the same slate commissioned to roof

this red brick one-room schoolhouse, 1884 carved above the entrance, dating our dwelling the way the *mezuzah*, slightly tilted, nailed to the maple doorpost, is a reminder to teach words scripted from time's other side and to speak of them and to bind them as a sign and to wear them as frontlets on the forehead the way birds are distinctively marked,

like these winter survivors lighting around the birdfeeder: the fluffed up blue jay perched on the twisted blueberry bush, the cardinal's occasional flame-flash, the surprise feather whistle of the mourning dove, its sleek neck jerking at groundseeds, the woodpecker divining on the sycamore, the omnipresence of the chickadees, the common juncos, the snowbird hovering where wheatfield edges into wood

in the winged pages of a bedside book. From stiff leaves, spruce cones, lopsided apples, hardened with the season. From dried-out sunflower seeds whose stalks only months ago were taller than our heads, taller than the telephone wires, leaves large as tabletops, from popcorn husks clothes-pinned to the greenhouse rope, from canning and preserving, from consuming the past

in the present, from mint we transplanted from beside my Russian grandmother's rented wrap-around porch: you took this name. From eggshells and coffee grounds and carrot bits in the compost pit we built with scrap lumber and fence wire. From skunk cabbages that conceal their flowers in marshes along the spring that feeds the pond where you showed me the tadpoles as they one by one broke out of their sacs

and announced themselves to the water:

Ganya.

*

Getting to know Chris has been the most important event in my life; in fact, knowing her has changed my life in countless ways— an extraordinary teacher, the example of her life—curiosity into just about everything, her skills in living in a rural area, in creating a beautiful rich home and multi-faceted garden, in sensitivity toward the “10, 000 things” taught and teaches me to be more loving, more

attentive. And my life—and poetry—s has grown richer and more expansive, like her garden.

We married one extremely hot August 4, 1996—
at the B'nai Abraham Synagogue, and celebrated
with our loved ones a lively Hora in the front
yard of our schoolhouse— to the music of the
blues band, Atomic Chili!

*

We were both married previously. Neither of us had children, and it was clear we both wanted to, so we decided to look into adoption.

We knew China had a one child policy, and it was a difficult country for girls. After about a year and a half of filling out forms, having a social worker from the adoption agency visit our house, we were approved to adopt a child in China.

Some people might call the process random
of how a child is chosen random. And
some people might call it magical. There's a
thing called 'the red thread' some people
believe in. And we believe that, too—we
and the children meant for each other.
The red thread is our *bashert*—preordained, our destiny.

.

*

Poem: "Thinking About Our Daughter in the Chinese Orphanage"

Your heart is half-a-world away,
Another language, the other side

Of what I know. They say if I
Spoon into the earth long enough,

I can tunnel myself to you.
It seems that long, strange child,

Teaspoon, spooning all the tea
In your country. When I hold you

For the first time, will it feel
Like the center of our earth?

Or that the ends of the world
Have folded in on themselves

And collapsed in our embrace?
The sun will never set that day

When I soar in the bird's throat
Through the red thread of my desire.
What else to call that portion
Of the sky that cords us?

Since the beginning of time
We've been spinning on our axis

In our separate sections of space,
Holding the planet together.

My day your night my west
Your east we cannot exist

Without each other, your yin
My yang, small girl large man,

Both breathing the same air
That does not begin somewhere

And end somewhere else,
In our tiny villages, sounding

Our respective songs, our bodies
Proportionate measures of water,

Relative increments of dust and light,
Creatures of a similar power,

A secret source, each ignorant
Of the mysterious hours, the forces

That compel us, two foreigners,
Into this most familiar relation

That arrives out of that place
Distant as two planets,

Intimate as the soil's surface
To our own interior layers—

I will coax you into your life,
You will pull out of me my child.

*

Our first child, Mimi, was 13 months old, We
didn't go to the orphanage;

they brought the babies to the hotel where we were staying in a conference room called “The Peony Room.”

A Chinese woman, Flora, who worked for the adoption agency in China, was our guide connected with the orphanage.

Chris and I and the other couple who were also adopting their child were eating breakfast when Flora rushed in and screamed:

“the babies are here! The babies are here!”

We followed Flora to the the Peony Room and there were Mimi and their baby, Tiana-- and we were like “oh my gosh!...”

Mimi was already crawling around and eating a cracker.

*

Poem: “Field of Mustard”

The child we journeyed
half-way across the world to
raise as our own now
offers us the first flower

of the season. She holds it
tightly in her hand, a small
piece of her new earth:
coltsfoot, wild and yellow,

like the mustard flowers
they cultivate in the land
of her birth where peasants
irrigate the watery fields

in blue coats and straw hats,
some with babies strapped with
simple cloth on their backs,
not like the way I carried her

in my framed backpack into
a small village of a few mud
huts, each bare
except for large bags of rice

and old men sitting on the floor
 around a mahjongg board
 and a candle, perhaps a house like
 the one where she was born,

each having the same quality
 of natural light, shoes placed
 neatly outside the entrance.
 This is the life she won't live,

laundry drying above the square, hay
 stacked neatly, a water buffalo roped
 to a tree, mud-caked
 from the nearby paddies and, beyond,

the skyscrapers of the city, some
 with cranes on their roofs to
 construct more and more stories.
 We snapped as many photographs

as we could to show her at least a
 few slices of her lost world.
 Maybe it was wrong of us to try
 to capture anything at all of what

would make her long for more
 because we can never return her
 to the source of her beginnings,
 the blood and bones of her origin,

except with whatever we tell her that
 will make up the story of her life: how
 two ancient men with crinkled faces
 came out of their huts to pose with us

in front of the obliging water buffalo,
 framed by the afternoon mustard
 flowers that spread out into the
 architecture of the immediate distance.

*

Four years later, we knew that Mimi had to have a sister—
 and we wanted another baby, too. Both of us grew up in

relatively large families, and we believed that siblings were important for companionship. So, after a similar process with an adoption agency, we returned to China— this time with several couples, to meet Bella!
Bella, like Mimi, was 13 months old.

Our second journey to China—which included Mimi, who was five years old-- was a bit more dramatic:
it was four months after September 11, and the plane to Beijing was—threatened.
It was forced to land in a smaller city south of their capital, and each of us passengers were questioned and held for many hours! Eventually, the Chinese authorities arrested the culprit, and we were sent off to Beijing.

*

What I remember most about our first meeting with Bella is how she was carried into a large room with the other babies, wearing a yellow raincoat, and how the orphanage worker handed her to me. Mine were the first hands in her new life to hold her. I thought about her birth parents, and how they were forced, because of forces beyond their comprehension, to give this beautiful child away, hoping beyond hope that she would be—somewhere, somehow, loved. It felt very sacred.

*

Poem: “We Sang Her a Name”

Mourning doves and robins
And the school bus
Slowing down and pausing
And picking up our child

Who was once so distant
We wouldn't know how To
imagine her.

Remember traveling across the world
To gather her in our embrace And
claim her as our own?

Where are those who birthed her,

Without whom she would be as unfamiliar to us As
everything else we will never love?

Do those who made her
Call her in a language
This chosen one still hears in her sleep?

They sang her a name, then,
Because of forces beyond comprehension,
Set her down in a public place and hurried away,
Heavier in their absence.

And we appeared.
And lifted her up.

And sang her another.

*

Our girls have now grown to be women,
and they have completed our family, a
Jewish family!

Both our children had their mikvahs, Went to
Hebrew School, became bat mitzvahed And
confirmed—at B'nai Abraham Syagogue!
We are truly blessed.

As a poet, I can't help but think about their journeys, and
I came to the realization
that perhaps their biological parents, and my ancestors,
so different in their origins and beliefs, also
had similarities.

*

**Poem: MY RUSSIAN-JEWISH GRANDPARENTS AND THE
BIRTH PARENTS OF OUR CHINESE CHILD MEET AT
A CAFÉ AND DISCUSS OUR CHILD'S FUTURE**

Schmu-el and Malka and our child's
 Chinese birth parents are sipping tea at a
 café somewhere between the Pale
 Settlement of Russia and central-rural
 China.

They speak in signs and gestures, swirling
 arms like dancers, shaping fingers into figures,
 standing up and swaying, contorting bodies
 to emphasize some obscure point, even

employing pauses and long silences to further
 the conversation. The men gesture:
 my grandfather's *yarmulke* is as black
 as I imagine our child's birth father's hair.
 The women continue to fill their husband's cups
 and stare off into the distance. The men agree
 on the major issue: each will have to sacrifice
 their darlings,

their children—send them away, across miles
 of land and ocean, into a realm further and
 more unfamiliar than they could understand
 even in their own tongue, a place perhaps

like those faraway and never-never lands in
 the stories of each of their childhoods:
 palace on a cloud, temple beyond the stars,
 Jerusalem or Shangri-la. It's better

to think of that strange country this way
 than to ponder the potential dangers—
 strangers in strange lands, years of forced labor,
 the poverty and destitution they themselves

know something about, each in their own way,
 these farmers and peddlers, each of them know
 dark to dark. Their gestures are more subtle
 and sophisticated now, they even forget

and sometimes break out into their Yiddish
 and Mandarin, which sounds as exotic as a
 gathering of multicolored birds singing
 through the tea's steam.

The bill, which is grief, arrives.
They agree to split it.
They accompany each other to the gate
that opens out into their separate centuries.

Through unfathomable signs, they gesture to meet again.

*

Chapter 9: Judaism and Poetry, Poetry and Judaism For me, poetry and Judaism are inextricably bound. Just today I started writing a poem inspired by the passing of a great American poet, Gerald Stern, 97 years old, from Pittsburgh, and grew up in Squirrel Hill.

He wrote often about being Jewish. I saw him read, and afterwards we talked, and he said, “you’re a poet, right?” Poets can smell each other out.

I sent him a book or two. He wrote me a nice letter that said, in part: “clearly your Jewish soul was hunting after mine.”

His poems inspired me to write a poem about meeting him and how he was a Jewish poet, which reminded me of my mother,

who, as I said, was also a kind of Jewish poet and who inspired me to become Jewish poet—

she was my Jewish poetry mother he was kind of a Jewish poetry father.

Poem: “Both Poets”

For Gerald Stern and Millie Terman

Clearly your Jewish soul was out hunting mine, Stern said in his hand scrawled yellow lined note I’m reading the day after he died.

Born in 1925, same year as my mother who said: *we breathed. We were Jewish.*
you both had the Depression and the big war

and Eisenhower’s great America and houses of ticky-tacky and lunch counters and Vietnam and that beautiful tragic President and the radicals and that *meshugga* Tricky Dicky

and all that nuclear mishigas to look forward to, both
Polish-Ukrainian, both commanded by the laws of
the same wild God who never leaves us alone--

Stern in dirty Pittsburgh, Millie in dirty Cleveland,
Both poets—Stern a *macher*, a real *lantzman*,
Millie a *bissl shtick* with rhyme at bar mitzvahs, weddings,

Stern with a little more *Yiddishe Cup* and Millie a
whole shebang of *heimish*, both haranguing me
not to be a *putz*, but a *mensch*,

at which I failed, my soul on the loose for atonement, wondering
why I haven't written a poem about Jerimiah,
who every Thursday at 2:30 visits our Prophets class

and in our cracked voices we *kvetch* the bad news to the Philistines, the
Moabites, the Ammonites, warning that *every head is bald*
and every beard is shorn, and the Edmonites, descendents of Esau,

whose renouncing of his birthright marked him and all his descendants,
a lesson you, Stern, my poetry papa, and you, Millie, my poetry mama,
continue to *lernen* me through my thick head, and when I give a hearing

to the plea of the needy, and not judge the case of an orphan, I can
drink the fruit of the vine with Gerry, and especially Millie who,
New Year's Eve in Jerusalem, drunk on *Manischewitz*,

at the King David Hotel, she hoisted herself up on the bed
and danced and lifted her full glass in toast not to Jeremiah,
that bullfrog, but her *mishpucha*, in that holy city, finally.

*

I'm more Jewish than ever depending
on how one defines it.

I consider Jewishness as a quality of the soul.
We have a Jewish home, we are
involved in our synagogue, and my
poetry is embedded in Judaism or
Judaism is embedded in my poetry.
I love both passionately.

There are things I argue with, but now I think that's a very Jewish response. With Judaism –like with poetry--I have no choice.

I was chosen and I'm stuck with it and that's more than ok.