

Growing Up Jewish

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May 16, 2014



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I was born in the Humboldt Park neighborhood of Chicago. For the first 6 years we lived with my Mother's parents, but when my brother was born we emigrated with many other Jewish families 7 miles straight north to the West Rogers Park neighborhood near Loyola University in Chicago. It was a typical middle class area made up of small bungalows, 3 story apartments and larger brick apartment buildings. I would have a half mile walk to grade school and a mile walk to high school. We never took a school bus and as a result we never missed a day of school. Our neighborhood was all white and everyone was either Jewish or Catholic. I felt sorry for my Catholic neighbors who had to go to church on Sunday, while we could watch Flash Gordon all wrapped up in our blankets sitting against the radiator.

Families all lived in close proximity to each other. We lived 2 streets from my aunt & uncle and my cousins lived nearby with my father's parents. Shortly after we moved my grandparents moved 2 streets away from us, my aunt & uncle moved a half a mile away and my cousins moved about 1 mile away. And we never went to a restaurant. Every holiday was celebrated at one of our relatives homes. My grandparents all came from Russia, my mom's from near Latvia or Lithuania and my dad's from the Kiev area. The youth movement in Russia at the turn of the 19th were socialists or communists comrades of Lenin. My grandfather's boyhood friend, Maxim Gorki became the Poet Laureate of Russia. Although my Father's parents came from the Ukraine I never heard them use that term—they were from Russia. Later I found out that there was a tremendous amount of anti-semitism in the Ukraine and Jews were not allowed to become citizens.

Many young people at the time were very angry at God. It was a tough time economically (many Jews were farmers) and very often the Czar blamed the tough times on the Jews. As a result many of the immigrants were not religious, wondering how come God's chosen people were being so persecuted. As a result my parents received no religious training whatsoever and never attended schul. In fact, I remember one story that my Mother used to tell me. She said that they would go down to the Catholic Church and play with the toys—then after a while the nuns would put everything away and try to convert them. At that point my grandfather wouldn't let them go to the church anymore. One day when I was 7 or 8 I started to imagine a world going on after I was dead. I just couldn't imagine a world where I had no awareness or knowledge of what was going on. I came into my Mother's room with tears in my eyes. My Mother hugged me and said, don't worry everyone goes through this when they are about your age. Don't worry she said, these thoughts will go away.

My public school was 99 44/100% Jewish from kindergarten to 12th grade. Our school was so Jewish that even the kids who weren't Jewish took off for the Jewish holidays—as it was silly to come to class with nobody else there. Many of the teachers were Jewish and everyone was white. In fact the only Black people that I ever saw were the man shoveling coal into the apartment buildings and the ladies that usually came every week or two to clean houses.

One day when I was 9 my mom showed up at the baseball field after school. It turned out to be my first day of Hebrew School. Seems like all the parents in the neighborhood decided to send their children to Hebrew school until they were 13 so they could get Bar Mitzpah. That meant after getting out of school at 3:15 we had to immediately head over to the synagogue and spend the next two hours learning the Hebrew language and studying the bible. I didn't learn much Hebrew, but I fell in love with the Bible stories. Especially the Judges, like Samuel Gideon, Barak and Deborah. This would connect with my love of History in public school all the way through college. I remember we collected quarters in a book and when the book was full we donated it to plant trees in Israel. I planted my trees in honor of my grandfathers who would each pass away just before and after I was thirteen.

As I said, I didn't learn much Hebrew, but I learned the shape of every Ford, Chevy and Chrysler that drove by while I was in class. Finally, just before I turned thirteen, I prepared for my Haftorah (reading from the Torah Schroll in Temple) with the rabbi every week. My rabbi, Benjamin Birnbaum was the real life brother of comedian George Burns (who incidentally played God in the movies). Rabbi Birnbaum not only taught me Haftorah, but he wrote my speech thanking all of my relatives for raising me right.

After your Bar Mitzpah you didn't have to go to Hebrew School ever again. In High School we would attend the Holiday Services at the local Park District Field House, but would never attend synagogue on a regular basis. The most sacred High Holy Day is Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of atonement where after repenting for the seven days after Rosh Hashanah (the New Year) you fast hoping to get your name inscribed the Book of Life. One year when I was about 12 my best friend and I absent mindedly walked

into the local bakery after the service was over and bought a couple of chocolate donuts. Boy were we embarrassed when one of our teachers caught us walking down the street with chocolate all over our faces.

In college I would attend services only on the High Holy days. But one time the rabbi asked everyone to stand up to say kaddish—the prayer for the dead for all those who died in the holocaust. For me, Kaddish is a very personal prayer—it is actually not a sad and mournful prayer, but rather a celebration of God and a celebration of Life. I was totally turned off that the rabbi was asking me to say it for the victims of the holocaust—none of whom were directly related to me as far as I knew. As a result I did attend another Jewish service for many many years. While many of my friends were studying new religious movements, I never took even one class in that area. But one day while walking home from class I stopped at the corner and openly recited to God that until someone could show me where that first bang came from, I would continue to believe in Him.

After spending 3 years in graduate school, I took some time off in search of the meaning of life. I was always infatuated with San Francisco, having been born on Francisco Street and having fallen in love with the baseball and football icons Willie Mays and Y.A. Tittle. So I left Indiana University and head straight for—the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee, the Outer Banks of North Carolina, the Allegheny Mountains of Pennsylvania, Boston, Oregon and finally San Francisco. First I met some communal folks who were running an organic fruit stand near Santa Barbara. They even had a historical foundation, believing in the reality of Atlantis, but they were Christian and I did not feel comfortable with that.

When I met some members of the Creative Community project in San Francisco, I visited their house for dinner on Christmas eve. Their introductory lecture was about some kind of elephant, but the speaker was a Jewish professor. As I studied with them at their workshop site in Northern California, I met several other leaders of the community who were also Jewish. Somehow, meeting these folks made me much more comfortable than I had been with the other commune. When I began to study about the life of Jesus, I realized for the first time in my life that Jesus was actually Jewish—something that they never taught us in Hebrew School. While my parents and cousins had traveled to Israel and my brother had actually lived on a kibbutz for a few years, I had never had the desire to go there. That all changed when I met a woman who had just come back from Israel and she showed me her photos. Somehow looking at the Garden of Gethsemane, Golgotha and the Sea of Galilee where Jesus had given his “sermon on the mount” that desire changed completely.

In 1982 I had the opportunity to attend the Unification seminary in Barrytown, New York where three years later I would receive my M.Div degree. As I said, I had not taken a religious education class since my Bar Mitzpah when I was 13. So this was new stuff. I took an Old Testament Class with a Romanian Rabbi and then signed up for a weekly Bible discussion in a local synagogue. The rabbi started out by asking each of us to describe God and of course, we got 15 different answers. Then I saw the movie “The Chosen,” from Chiam Potok’s novel. Since I already had a Master’s Degree in Psychology I thought that I would write my thesis dealing with some aspect of Psychology. But as I got into studying Judaism, I decided to write my thesis comparing Judaism, Christianity and Unification thought. By studying Christianity and Unification Thought, I began to understand Judaism more and more. My temple had been conservative, which meant that even though I knew all the rituals, songs and prayers, I did not know what any of them meant, because we did not use English. My parents began going to temple when they turned 70 but they attended a reformed temple which used a majority of English in their worship service. I would attend the High Holiday Services with them and I was so inspired as for the first time I could read the prayers in English.

While my Austrian wife grew up attending Catholic Church, her Mother was more spiritual and into the ideas of Rudolf Steiner. We had no problem raising our 5 children with the Divine Principle, the Children’s Bible and the Jewish traditions and holidays. My family is Cohan which was the sub-tribe of the Levites—the ones that got to go into the Holy of Holies one day every year and the ones that carried the scrolls around Jericho 7 times. In the Jewish tradition, if your Mother is Jewish, you are Jewish for life—even if you become a Zen Buddhist or a Unificationist. In other words you cannot un-jewsize yourself. Because the fear of inter-marriage is so strong, the state of Israel changed that law so now, even if your Father is Jewish, you are circumcised for life.

Personally, the more I became a Christian and a Unificationist, the more Jewish I felt as well. Because all the rituals that I used to perform began to make sense to me for the first time. One time in California someone witnessed to 3 Orthodox Jews who were emigrating from Australia to Israel. During the workshop they took me out into a field and showed me all their morning rituals. When a Jew performs a good deed, it is called a mitzpah. When a Jew gets another Jew to perform a Jewish ritual that is also a mitzpah.

One thing that has always pulverized my heart has been the response to our movement by the Jewish Community. Jewish rabbis were at the forefront of the faith breaking industry. As our movement matured, participants at our conferences came from every denomination within the African-American community,

the Catholic Church, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs and even an occasional Atheist—but very few if any mainline Jews. I was even thrown out of my parent's rabbi's office when he found out that I was a follower of the Rev Sun Myung Moon.

After being involved with the Unification Movement for over thirty years, I was able to invite my parents to receive the marriage blessing ceremony. Yet even in that ceremony there were prayers offered from so many faiths, denominations and cultures, but not one Jewish Rabbi was present. Thus, it was with great joy that I attended our movement's inaugural Middle East peace Conference. Since that time I have been on 5 trips to Israel and I have had many profoundly deep experiences. The first time, I had a very deep experience as a Jew. I have also had experiences as a Christian and as a Unificationist. Sometimes, it was confusing. I had special experiences with the Christian shrines (the Sea of Galilee, Gethsemane, the beggars field where Judas was buried as we buried a cross at sunrise, Mt Nebo, looking across the Jordan at Israel as Moses had, thousands of years earlier—an inter-faith service on top of the mountain—like no other I have ever experienced in my life; Amman, Jordan—a week after 2 hotels were bombed, where the crowds welcomed us (while everyone else was running away from Jordan) and cheered us in ways that I have never experienced. Meeting Dr. Gloria Wright from Atlanta and reading the Sermon on the Mount standing where Jesus had given it 2000 years earlier; Dr. Wright has become my true sister ever since; becoming blood brothers with the Israelis who work with us—Shuki and Shoshana Ben Ami and Eliezar and Rachael Glaubach—a Soviet gulag survivor who with his wife Rachael was chosen to light a candle during the 50th anniversary of Yad Vachem; traveling an Egyptian Coptic (Christian) professor who was allowed to speak at the tomb of Jesus; celebrating 9-11 in Jerusalem; making friends with our tour guide, a Palestinian Christian who was born in Colombia and had returned to Jerusalem to help bring unity; taking one of our Jewish sisters to the Wailing wall—where she later had one of the deepest experiences of her life; going to the Red Sea—we stopped at Masada, then traveled on to the Kibbutz where my cousins have lived for 40 years. Visiting the port city of Haifa, known as the Peace City, because the Jewish and Muslims work side by side and don't argue theology. It was Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year and we ate apples and honey with the Chief Rabbi and his wife (who came to Israel from Harlem in 1948).

I know that these experiences are all highly personal, but they have been so significant in shaping my life. Each time that I was in Israel there was a bombing—including our sunrise mission to bury the cross in the beggar's field. People were killed not far from us—so we have to keep going, because nothing else is bringing peace.

Several of our member's children have accompanied us, including two of my children's best friends. We brought the former President of Costa Rica and Nobel Prize winner and the President of Indonesia to call for peace. I met Iranian Jews (a new experience for me). I listened as the vice mayor of Jerusalem repented to the Arabs for not learning their language.

Georgia Senator Donzella James and I visited homes in a Palestinian Village—what a deep experience—the way we were welcomed in and treated was so beautiful. We came unannounced and left with prayer beads and a bottle of hand pressed olive oil—given in love—try knocking on a neighbor's door and see if they invite you in—most anywhere in modern day America.

Rev. Moon's vision was to gather African-American ministers, Palestinian Christians and Muslims, Israelis (mostly women), the Chief Rabbi of Israel, and so many others—who believe that peace is somehow possible—if we communicate first. Rev. Moon engaged our members to spouses of enemy nations and that has worked—why not this? The Palestinians deeply respect and understand the suffering that their African-American brothers and sisters have gone through, thus they listen intently during our conference sessions.

Our leaders met with President Arafat, President Shimon Peres and several members of the Knesset (Israel's parliament). We began to build relationship with the Palestinian religious leaders and as a result were able to bring Israelis directly from the Western Wall to Al Aksah Mosque (something that no Israeli had ever experienced before). We held press conferences with the President of Indonesia, and called for peace, friendship and brotherhood, throughout every corner of Jerusalem. We developed a deep relationship with the Druse Community. We made friends with many Muslims who now reside in America. Most of all we caused Jews to listen to Muslims and Christians and vice versa—as never before. During the interfaith service on top of Mt Nebo (which you can only access from Jordan) the guy who was “too Jewish,” felt like he had transcended all denominations.

Bishop Jesse Edwards preached, and Rev Phillip Shanker read the bible, as Christians, Jews, Arabs, Israelis, African-Americans, Caucasians, Native Americans and Hispanics went beyond all boundaries to truly experience being one family of man. We had not come as tourists, we came as peace-makers. One spiritualist even testified that our presence there at that time afforded the spiritual protection necessary for many of our world leaders. Personally, I felt that this was Rev. Moon's final condition—that by making the effort to bring peace to the Middle East, God could bring peace to Korea.

There is much much more, but suffice it to say that, albeit we did not accomplish enough, is it not better to light one candle than to curse the darkness? I believe that we gave hope to many (both inside of and outside of our movement). You have to believe that God is pulling for us and that he knows that eventually, in the not so distant future, even greater miracles will occur.

There is a synagogue 2 blocks from where I work in downtown Chicago. Every week they offer a “lunch and learn” with the rabbi. I have been a regular and usually take notes. The good thing is that the Rabbi starts to speak at 1:20 and has to end by 1:30 when its time for the afternoon service. His topic last week was, “what does it mean to be holy?”