



TEMPLE
EMANUEL

SOMETHING NEW!



THE PEOPLE'S PULPIT™
A COLLABORATION OF MANY VOICES

an

On-Line Journal

Ralph Gilbert, Past President & Founder

Rabbi Van Lanckton, Past President & Editor In Chief

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Issue One

Welcome to **THE PEOPLE'S PULPIT**. We've created this journal in consultation with Rabbi Gardenswartz to give each one of us, the opportunity to tell your own spiritual story. We believe that Jewish wisdom as delineated in the Torah, debated in the Talmud, restated by the Rambam and made current by Rabbis Harold Kushner and Lord Rabbi Johnathan Sacks

is the key to our continuity and survival. We are now on the cusp of momentous challenges. In addition to virulent antisemitism and hatred of Israel, we will soon face uncontrolled climate change, increased genetic engineering and misguided use of A. I. We must now adhere all the more to our basic Jewish traditions which teach us how to change, yet stay the same. Israeli historian Yuval Harari, author of Sapiens, opines that human beings as we know them will not be around in a century or two. We believe that all Judaism is aspirational and that each of us are on a spiritual journey. If we share our journey with each other, the members of Temple Emanuel, we may learn to encourage each other to strengthen our spiritual resolve to successfully negotiate our uncertain future.

ISSUE ONE

Our first issue is overwhelmed by the unspeakable crimes committed against Israel. In this issue we have included five stories and a prayer but first we begin with a piece about the defining joy of being a Jew by Nina Gilbert, a college student. Next, Kayla Dines, a graduate student, wrote a prose poem about her shock and pain not only about the attack on Israel, but of the lack of the compassionate response from her friends. Then, Gary Jacobson wrote about being in Israel during the horrific attack. On another subject, Hy Kempler wrote about his continued anguish over a segment of his family that were lost in Nazi controlled Europe. Finally, our mood changes to joy and celebration as Van Lanckton writes about his conversion to Judaism.

Ralph and Van

1.
What Being Jewish Means To Me:
Everything

By: Nina Gilbert
October 1, 2023



Bio: Nina is an outstanding graduating Senior in the School of Journalism at U. Mass. Amherst. She has already had the good fortune to have some of her work published. With her enthusiastic personality and her innate talent she looks forward to a deeply fulfilling journalistic career.

My grandparents continue to lead by example for the Gilbert family as they have for decades. They have taught my incredible father Aaron, myself, and my beautiful sister Alexa how to pursue a life of meaningful purpose and lasting impact of love (with lots of hugs, kisses, and M&M's along the way). My Papa and Bubba's wisdom and curiosity has made for hundreds of rich discussions in which I walk away from feeling filled with gratitude for the role models I have to look up to.

My grandparents have taught me that it is always more important to ask questions rather than give answers. They have taught me that true wisdom lies in having the knowledge to know you don't know it all. To allow your mind to be changed, to continue rather than close conversation, to dig deeper. To be surprised. To be jaded is to deny yourself of the beauty of being surprised by life's wonders.

Today, I come to you to share how Judaism has molded me into the person I am today. To be Jewish, to me, means I will always choose peace, scholarship, justice, and loving compassion in the face of good and evil.

Right now, evil is overwhelming both me and the Jews I love. So, I am here again, choosing peace, scholarship, justice, and loving compassion. I am terrified and mourning for my Jewish brothers and sisters both in and outside of Israel. As my sister Alexa says, "We need to turn back to Judaism and honor our heritage because no one can take it away. Nothing can break us" Historically people have wanted to see us Jews disappear. The fact that I exist is astounding. I come from a long

line of survivors who have fought for not only their religion but their lives. I come from an exiled, enslaved, displaced, and persecuted line of people that dates back to 4,000 plus years. A people who globally have been almost eradicated in camps and pogroms throughout generations.

My ancestors were exiled from their motherland, and are still fighting for their right to a Jewish state, today. We are a culture of vibrantly alive resilience that has unequivocally persisted when all odds were stacked against us.

Although we make up less than 0.2% of the world's population we have earned 22% of all Nobel Prizes. I can't imagine how much higher that number would be if not for the extermination of my people. However, looking back has never been what the Jews around me taught me to do. We look forward to it. We unite. We debate. We mourn. We laugh. We cry. My people have managed to devote their genius to creating the most incredible advancements in all fields whilst experiencing some of the worst treatment known to humankind. They persevered so our culture and traditions could see another day, not knowing how many would be left. The imprint the Jewish people have made on our society is one that is as bright, powerful, and inspiring as its people.

Since I was eight years old my sister and I spent our summers in Amherst, New Hampshire at Camp Young Judaea and my experiences there continue to be a pillar of my Jewish identity today. Come sunrise and sunset we sang the Hatikvah with our arms around our Jewish brothers and sisters as we swayed in the morning and evening glow. Jewish summer camp is where I learned what it felt like to belong and have purpose. I believe I was 10 or 12 years old when I realized that being a Jew made me feel magical.

To be a Jew meant I was strong, brave, loving (and funny). My fellow Jewish friends and I spent our summers savoring what it felt like to be around people who make you feel valued, understood, and accepted. During one of my junior-year sociology classes at The University of Massachusetts Amherst, I participated in an exercise in which we reflected upon our identity. We were asked to write down 5 pieces of paper each with one aspect of our identity we care about. I wrote "daughter", "woman", "Jew", "sister", and "lover". He slowly asked us to remove one identity after the other until we were left with one. The first one I removed was "lover" because I realized that was the same as "Jew". The second I removed was "daughter", "sister", then "woman" because they were the same as "Jew". I realized that my

Jewish identity is not something which stands independent of my other identities, however, encapsulates them all under the umbrella which is the culture, morals, and customs of Judaism.

To be a Jew means you are one of the millions of Jews before and after you. My sisters and brothers. My fathers and mothers. I could not let go of my being a Jew. Not for anything, as it is everything.

2.
MY HEART BREAKS

by Kayla Dines
October 17, 2023

Bio: Kayla Dines (23) attended the Solomon Schechter Day School and grew passionate about female empowerment and her Jewish roots. Now at Georgetown University she is earning her Masters in Human Resource Management.



Every time I open my phone my heart breaks
It breaks every time I see an instagram post
Every time I see a name
Every time I see a new story
Every time i hear the same story twice
My heart breaks when i catch a glimpse of the news
And when i walk down the street not knowing who's on my side
It makes my heart break when holocaust survivors now see this
My heart breaks when everyone our age who has just fallen in love
with Israel
Watches everything fall apart
My heart breaks for Roni
And for ellie
And for Niv, Gal and Hili
And for my entire family in Israel
And for every single post I have seen about death
About dying
About beheading
About blood
About raves
About raides
About people hiding
About missiles

About machines on the side of the road
About the dehumanization of a war
Of our side and the other side
The fact that the bombs and gun and missiles have people behind
them
People actively choosing to shoot
Actively choosing to terrorize
It makes you think and wonder
About what it means to be jewish
What it means to be from the united states
What it means to have been to Israel five times
But a part of me is still breaking
Thats not where i live
I have close family and friends
But the mourning is for the jewish people
The jewish geography plays itself fiercely
And it used to be for fun
This time it is about recovering the lives of the dead
And finding missing soldiers and babies and grandparents
This network that can outlast the holocaust
That can outlast the parting sea
This religion is my identity
I hurt more for this than for women
I hurt more than this for Americans
For the homeless
For the helpless
For anything i love and care about
This hits the hardest
This feels like everything
And when this feels like everything
Everything feels like nothing
And the sparkle dims
And the day off feels heavy
And phone calls feel rehearsed
And the words go in circles
Formulating conversations that have been had a million times
This time the conversation is not about who is right

But who is hurt
Who is hurting
Who needs healing
Who is posting
Who is held hostage
And who needs to help
And then it becomes who is wrong and right
And an unfollow on instagram
And fear walking down the street
And feeling lonely as a jew
And feeling like the big world out there
Especially on my walk is filled with strangers
Especially in this melting pot
A visitor central
With opinions but without the feelings of humanity
This makes me feel like I need to be in Israel that I belong to be in a
place that feels like mine
That the way i practice my judaism aligns
And that comforts me in a different kind of way
It feels loving and nurturing
When i think about these bombs i think about the streets ive driven
And the people and places i have never met
But then why does it feel so personal
If none of these people were my personal people and friends
It is scary to be here
But the thought of being there is unfathomable
And i feel guilty for being in the united states
While the people who chose to live in that state
Are in fight or flight
Are in world stopping
Earth shattering
Scary, dangerous, war
The entire world has eyes on my favorite place
And the negativity and hate may be valid
And Israel in the conflict could be wrong
And the idea of being wrong is scary
But what is more scary is not knowing when this will end

How long it will feel like holding breath
Is this how the holocaust felt for people in America
Is this how it felt for Israelis on 9/11
There is something about being Jewish and the bond over a religion
that holds us together, like glue
I have never felt the anger and spark inside of my soul so fiercely
Every complaint on birthright, every moment on lacking gratitude for
being in the holiest of lands
Everything about this feels personal
And everything feels a bit more helpless
And it feels like time as stopped
And it feels like as a whole we hold our breath
In hopes for peace
In hopes for recovery
In hopes for the celebration of the end
But the end feels so far away
It feels all consuming
As if the more we worry the less it will impact
The better things will get.

3.

My Split Brain

By Gary Jacobson MD

October 16, 2023

Bio: Gary Jacobson MD is on the faculty of Harvard Medical School in the Department of Psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital. He is the President Emeritus of the Middle East Forum of Falmouth and has lectured on international conflict at the JFK School of Government and Brandeis University where he was appointed a University Fellow. He was a columnist for the Jewish Advocate with an interest in Israel and Jewish history. Dr. Jacobson serves as a Trustee of Temple Emanuel and is a present or former Board Member of CAMERA, New England American Jewish Committee, and the New England ADL. He served for 4 years as Co-Chair of the Jewish-Muslim Dialogue Group of New England AJC.



By the time you read this, you will know a lot more about the results of Israel's war against HAMAS. This note is what it was like to go from celebration to confusion and worry at the start of the war from someone who was there.

At 8:15 in the morning of October 7th preparing to get dressed for shul, I heard a deep boom. In Israel a sound like that is never benign. Our small Jerusalem hotel room shook. "The Iron Dome", I said to my wife. Looking out the window we could see nothing except a gorgeous cloudless blue sky and the yellow tan branches of a large eucalyptus tree. The contrast of the auditory input and the visual was hard to integrate. Once outside, I could see thin streaks of white across the sky, evidence of a rocket trajectory.

On Shabbat Simcha Torah, as on all Shabbots, television and cell phones were turned off in this neighborhood. The first understanding I had of the seriousness of the events was when I reached the Eretz Chemda

(Desirable Land) Shul in the Katamon section of Jerusalem and was told that the kiddish was cancelled. Kiddish cancelled? No big deal you think.

Simcha Torah services are long. At the Eretz Chemda shul they do not wait for services to be over but instead have a substantial kiddish break just after the Torah scrolls are put back in the arc and before musaf service. I was informed about this practice the night before during the raucous and joyful rounding of the Torah scrolls, singing, dancing, hands clapping, and just plain noise making of Erev Shabbat and Erev Shimchat Torah. A further simcha: that Erev Shabbat was also celebrating the engagement of the son of the shul's chazan, Alex Katz. The scene could have been anywhere there were traditional Jews. It could have been in Newton- but with an important difference.

Outside the shul was a Zaka motorcycle on which was mounted a large case with trauma treatment equipment to be used for a first responder. Parked outside the shul and near the motorcycle was a fully equipped Zaka ambulance. Alex Katz not only led the services, was not only our chazan, was not only celebrating the simcha of his son's engagement, but was also the driver of these vehicles. When notified of an emergency by page including during services, he chose which vehicle was needed, turned the chazan duties over to another, and took off to address the emergency. On Shabbat. Only in Israel.

At the end of services on Friday night Simcha Torah, a congregant wanted to be sure I was at shul early the next morning. Smiling he leaned over to me and said, "Shabbat Shalom, Chag Someach, and remember, don't be a JFK at shul tomorrow". "JFK?", I asked not being able to conjure up an image of President Kennedy at any shul at any time. "Yes," he answered. JFK means Just For Kiddish. Don't come just for kiddish". He needn't have worried. I came early. Around 11 o'clock the loud wail of the sirens warning of incoming rockets interrupted Shabbat Simcha Torah. Another boom was clearly heard and then another. The Rabbi hurried the return of the Torahs to the arc and told everyone to go home and into shelters. There was no kiddish that day – and no more simcha.

I chose not to go into the shelter of the shul but to walk a few blocks to my son and daughter-in-law's house. The sirens had stopped screaming and several more streaks of vapor across the sky were the only reminders of what had just happened. I saw no damage and no one hurt. Elsewhere in Israel the nightmare of nightmares was being discovered but not it was not yet known in my neighborhood.

All the expected family members were at the family house , especially the little girl whose first birthday my wife and I had come to celebrate. The only person missing was this child's father. The mundane events of everyday life- someone is a bit late- are usually of no account. In Israel, especially after a rocket attack, there is nothing mundane. The missing relative showed up and we sat down for a Shabbat meal together. He had a Glock 19 handgun tucked into his right belt mostly hidden by his shirt. "A gun?", I asked. "We have an eruv here", he answered. This was his form of humor. In fact following the horrendous discoveries that followed this Shabbat, a number of Orthodox Rabbis asked their congregants to carry their guns with them whenever they were outside, including on Shabbat. Eruv or no eruv.

The afternoon of Shabbat Simcha Torah sirens blared and we retreated three more times to the shelter of the family house and closed the bomb proof door : this beautiful one year old girl, (thankfully mostly asleep), her parents, her grandparents, and my wife and me. Four generations in an 8x10 shelter in Jerusalem.

Nothing prepared me, or Israel, or the entire Jewish world for the tragedies that took place on October 7th and beyond but on an entirely different level and at a magnitude worlds apart, there were deep concerns before then: 150,000 Israelis demonstrating in the streets against their government. An intransigent, my way or the highway, leadership. An insistence on extremist positions and deterioration into a verbal civil war. Jew vs. Jew is never a pretty picture and the scenes for months before Succoth and Simcha Torah were ugly indeed.

Two conversations I had on the eve of October 7th added detail to the concerns. The first was a conversation with an 18 year old soldier, Jacob, the son of a family member, and active duty Army in Huwara in the West Bank. Huwara had been the scene of the killing of Israeli families by Palestinians and the killing of at least one 19 year Palestinian by Israeli settlers.

Jacob's job was to stop each Palestinian car on a major route and inspect it for guns. He stopped car after car and found none. He inspected the cell phones of the drivers for possibly useful information and found several with photos of young men, his age, with automatic rifles. Photos of guns but no guns. He asked his commanding officer how to handle this and was told that if it's only a photo, let them pass. Days passed with plenty of photos but nothing three dimensional. Finally, he stopped a car and saw a

baseball bat in the back seat. No glove. No ball. Just a bat. He confiscated the bat.

“What are we doing there anyway?”, he asked no one in particular. “We don’t live there. If I were a Palestinian I just might be a guy with a gun. It makes no sense”. I asked Jacob if there was any way that he could see that Israelis and Palestinians could stop being enemies. “I don’t see how”, he said. “But it still makes no sense.”

The second conversation was with Jehuda, the son of a renown Israeli diplomat, the father of four, and a member of the faculty at the Hartman Institute. Reliably each week he showed up with his cohort of friends at the home of one of the Members of the Knesset to protest. After unloading a stream of complaints against what the government was trying to do (usurp too much power) and against Netanyahu himself, he surprised me by saying he was optimistic.

“I obviously come from a political family”, he said. “I also come from an Orthodox family even though I myself am not Orthodox any longer. This lets me talk with my Orthodox cousins as friends and it lets us be candid with each other. Finally, issues that were never talked about are now coming out.”

Jehuda, a graduate of an Orthodox yeshiva, said that yeshivas were a mixture of admirable and destructive. “Many students and teachers are sincere and their scholarship is respected – if not always followed. But many are just fooling around. Putting in the time. Playing a role. And many of the administrators are in it for the money they can get, not for the ideals. That’s what my cousins tell me. The good thing is that some Orthodox are beginning to want to change also. They are tired of what they see. They are beginning to join the protests. Israel can’t afford to have 10-12% of its population exempt from national duty and from the army. It’s not right. Secular Israelis know this and now at least some of the Orthodox younger men are saying this. That’s why I’m optimistic.”

I had heard almost the entire of Jehuda’s speech before in different contexts. I had also heard that no one knows how it will end, so I asked him. “I hope it’s not by outside attack.” He said, “ We are not prepared. Let me tell you that when I go to a reserve meeting it is different than it used to be. It used to be that everyone would show up. Now, not so. You would be

surprised at how many backaches, how many colds there are that keep reservists from showing up. I also think our enemies know we aren't prepared."

We now know that Yehuda was right in that our enemies saw an Israel that was dysfunctional. Fortunately, he was wrong about the reservists. The call up produced 150% of the number requested- so many that there was a shortage of protective body armor and helmets to go around.

Joshua, age 25 and a veteran of Israeli special forces, and his close friend originally from Newton, David Saluki worked with the Maimonides School to purchase, collect, and obtain export licenses for 20 or so duffel bags of equipment all within 24 hours, and arranged for El AL to fly them to Israel on October 12th. Joshua accompanied the equipment and upon landing helped distribute it to IDF centers – but not before he was interviewed on MSNBC world news. Joshua is my oldest grandson. So much for family pride. He is trying to rejoin his old special forces unit. That wish of his is easy for me to understand but hard for me to contemplate.

On rare occasions neurosurgeons divide the two hemispheres of the brain by severing the neurons that connect them to help contain certain severe seizure disorders. This results in a split brain in which one side literally may not pay attention to what the other side perceives. I have had no neurosurgery. However, I and so many people I know with family in Israel or love or Israel, pay attention to news from Israel so closely that at times all else seems screened out. And when we find relief from this by attention to our immediate surroundings at home, there is a feeling that we are missing something. Working hard for Eretz Yisroal and for Am Yisroal helps me put my brain back together. It's the only treatment I know that works. I recommend it.

ONE FAMILY: TWO FATES

by Hy Kempler

Bio: With a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology, Hy was privileged to have a fifty year career practicing and teaching in public and private mental health settings. An ardent supporter of CJP, he cochaired the Psychologists Group for the Health Professions. He is a long time member of TE and served on the Board of Directors, contributed to Summer Shul, and PirkeAvot programs, Chapel Minyan and the Israel Action Committee. Currently he is a participant in the Harvard Institute of Learning in Retirement where he is a Distinguished member. He is married to Sheila and they have two daughters and six amazing grandchildren.



I grew up with a theology that put God in the center of life and death, which I have since abandoned. My Orthodox Yeshiva education notwithstanding I was willing to consider chance or luck as an alternative. People die because they get sick, through accidents or disasters and not because of divine judgement.

However, I've come to doubt chance as a sufficient explanation. When people perish in an earthquake or plane crash coincidence or bad luck are offered as a cause. But those who survive in these situations often are seen as beneficiaries of a miracle. Some of us believe that humans are subject to a force e.g. God, that operates beyond our control. It was this idea reinforced by my family background and religious education that once led me to consider becoming a Rabbi. I even discussed it with my future wife, Sheila, while courting her. Instead I chose to become a psychologist. The pull of this choice is explored in *The Chosen*, a novel by Chaim Potok.

I was born in 1934 in Spisske Podrahie (SP), a small village in Slovakia. Slovak nationalism was on the rise accompanied by antisemitism. By 1936 Hitler's attacks against Western Czechoslovakia stirred unrest in parts of Slovakia. There were demonstrations in Bratislava and gross anti-semitic articles appeared in newspapers. In early 1936 a communication



from the US, announcing a critical family illness and urging us to come to America, changed the lives of my family forever. Sponsored by family, my parents, sister and I immigrated to the US, evading the Holocaust. We arrived at Ellis Island on November 25, 1937 after a ten day voyage on the liner SS Manhattan.

This family photograph has been staring at me for a long time. It reminds me of something unfinished that I'm hesitant to address because I don't exactly know how. Besides it stirs feelings of sadness. Pictured are my parents, (lower left), my father's parents (lower right), (upper row, right to left, my father's siblings) Simon, Blanca, Heskell and Dora. Taken in Slovakia in 1930 their fates were radically different. While my parents eluded the Holocaust, the others were murdered by the Nazis. How did this happen?

The message to my parents from the US urging us to immigrate came from my mother's family stating that that her mother, my grandmother Chana, had cancer. She said to her four daughters, son and husband, Shloma my grandfather, "I will not die until I see my daughter Malvina and her family". My mother's family had immigrated to the US from southeastern Slovakia in 1927. She was left behind because of a respiratory infection. Left alone, she lived with Shloma's brother Chaim's family until she married.

Growing up I knew that my mother's sisters were the most active in arranging for my family's immigration to the US. But I didn't appreciate the complexity of this effort until I began researching the process. According to the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) visa

quotas were mandated for each European country. The quota for citizens of Czechoslovakia in 1937 was 2878. Obtaining a visa was complicated and costly, requiring the completion of a seven step process. The prospective immigrant needed a sponsor who would guarantee financial support, obtain health records, be free of criminality, provide proof of purchase of tickets for transportation from Slovakia. The high cost helps to explain my grandfather's Shloma's anger at my father for not having funds to help defray my family's immigration expenses as he had been promised by my grandfather Judah or so I was told by my mother.

Details of the filing of the visa applications in SP and getting our health checked remain a mystery to me. Who contacted the US consulate in Bratislava to initiate these things? Also local transportation and interpreter access had to be arranged. Who did this? Was there a visa origination service? Who helped my aunts in the US? (My aunt Lila told me that she delivered cash to a mysterious person in the Bronx. "I was 6 month pregnant with my big belly and I took the subway from Brooklyn to the Bronx to deliver the money".)

Time was important in obtaining the visas which was most likely accomplished in a year. Delays could have been fatal given the unfolding of subsequent events in Europe shortly thereafter. A significant number of people were caught in the Holocaust because of failed visa applications. Only approximately 2500 visas from Czechoslovakia were issued in 1937. We received our visas, numbers 2169-2171 in September 1937.

The Other Kemplers

To my knowledge there was no contact between my father and his family in SP after we immigrated. Nor was there any between his family and any other relatives in the US. When I was a young teenager I recall accompanying my father to the Bronx to visit a woman Lotte W and her son Martin. I think Lotte was a relative of my grandfather Judah. They spoke German to each other and I couldn't understand what was said. I suspect they discussed the relatives from SP.

The absence of the SP family and their uncertain situation depressed my father. He spent many Sundays staring out the window of our Brooklyn apartment as if he was sitting Shiva. One day in 1946

when I wasn't home two former partisans from the SP region in Slovakia visited my father and told him all of his relatives were killed. But I was determined to find the facts for myself.

So in 1984 my wife Sheila and I went back to SP. I met with Nandor G., a family acquaintance and retired dentist living in Kosice, Slovakia about forty miles east of SP. My sister Esther helped me arrange this through her contact with two men living in Corpus Christi, Texas. They were the ones who visited my father earlier. Esther had exchanged Jewish New Year cards with them for many years.

Nandor, in his 70's, survived the war and he and his wife Ellie were among the dwindling population of Jews living in Kosice, tolerated by the Communist authorities. I told him that I was searching for information about my relatives. At the end of a Sabbath evening meal in Nandor and Ellie's apartment, he went to his desk and withdrew a notebook and said in German "All eleven of them were gathered in the SP town center on May 20 1942 and taken away probably to Majdanek and murdered. Another aunt, spouse and their children were also killed. They were your grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins." Stunned and barely catching my breath I said, "Could you tell me a little about them since I don't remember them". Nandor spoke about the others but I was too upset to take notes.

Conclusion

The reason why my parents evaded the Holocaust and the other Kemplers didn't seems clear. They were fortunate to have a family in the US to assist with immigration before the Holocaust began while the others didn't. What troubles me is not knowing whether my SP family made any effort to flee. When did they learn that they were in danger? Did they reach out to anyone in the US that may have helped? Did they make any effort to leave SP? Who might they have contacted and what response did they receive? Did anyone in the US attempt to contact them? How were they treated in their town before they were sent away? Did we fail them? Answers to these questions lie buried with the people who are no longer alive.

Finally, I ask myself whether all the events described can be attributed to chance or luck and/or the intervention of a divine presence.

Posed to a friend, the answer was clear, chance. He added that the SP family may have underestimated the precariousness of their situation. Yet when I consider the many details that went just right for my parents, luck doesn't feel sufficient. I confess not having a convincing resolution.

I feel at peace when I recite the Prayer "We acknowledge to you...for the lives that are entrusted to you ...and for the miracles and goodness that accompany us each moment -evening, morning and night..." And on the occasion when we recite the Yizkor prayer, remembrance for deceased family members, I include those from SP, our hometown who didn't succeed in escaping the Holocaust.

Christmas and Converts

by

Rabbi Van Lanckton

Rabbi Van Lanckton, Editor-in-Chief of The People's Pulpit, served as Temple Emanuel's President from 2001 to 2003. He converted to Judaism in 1967 at age 24. 36 years later, age 60, Van enrolled in the Hebrew College Rabbinical School, where he was ordained in 2009. Van and his wife, Alice, have been members of Temple Emanuel since 1978.



Rabbi Robinson invited me to give the sermon at Temple Emanuel on Saturday, December 25, 2010, Christmas Day. Here is an edited version of what I said.

44 years ago was the last time I celebrated Christmas.

I was 24 years old.

Four months later, I converted to Judaism.

After completing my initial study, and concluding the ceremonies of conversion, I officially became Jewish. But the journey continued. I still had much to learn. I was not immediately certain just how to be Jewish. Sometimes I even felt like an imposter.

I knew I was fully Jewish. It took me a while to recognize that I nevertheless was different from Jews by birth. They had always been Jewish. I was and always would be a Jew who used to be Christian. I would always have memories of my Christian life. Those memories were most powerfully rooted in the celebration of Christmas.

My original family was Protestant. Protestants do not generally have a rich ritual life. No dancing. No lively singing. Not a lot of food. Very little pageantry.

But on Christmas? That's different.

We celebrated Christmas in the Congregational Church in our home town of Darien, Connecticut. The whole family went to church together on Christmas Eve.

Here is the scene. The church is crowded. Every pew is filled. The service ends after midnight. It is the first minutes of Christmas Day. We all light candles. Each person carries a candle. We walk out of the church holding our lit candles. The night sky at first seems dark. Then we see that there are a million stars to light our way along with the candles. As we walk, and then as we gather in a group when everyone is outside, we sing Christmas carols and hymns to welcome the birthday of the baby Jesus.

At dawn, my sisters and I are eager to get downstairs to the living room. The tree stands there, bright with the decorations we put on the tree during the previous days. Dad turns on the lights. We stand there wide-eyed with our mouths open in wonder at the beauty of that sight. Then we see that there are many presents under the tree. Mysteriously, there are even more than when we went to bed. We exchange presents, rip off the colorful wrapping paper, read the books, play with the toys, and later enjoy a very special Christmas meal.

When I converted, back in 1967, those memories were still fresh. I had celebrated Christmas just four months earlier. But eight months after my conversion, when it got to be Christmas time again, I did not go back to my childhood home for Christmas. Nor was I ever with my parents and sisters for Christmas again. It's not that I couldn't have gone. I just didn't in the early years, probably because I was working on establishing to myself that I was really and truly Jewish and so didn't celebrate Christmas any more.

I never have been with my family on Christmas. Both of my parents have passed away, my younger sister converted to Buddhism and doesn't celebrate Christmas, and my older sister has established a pattern of celebration with her daughters and her grandchildren that doesn't have a place for me and Alice on Christmas.

Although I never went back to my childhood home for Christmas after I became Jewish, we visited often at other times. And when we did, we encountered some of the same issues that arise for other converts.

The most common issue is what to eat. Even with all good intentions, a Christian family is likely to serve non-kosher food. Forget about the issue of separate plates and a kosher kitchen. I'm talking about the Christmas ham that is the main entrée in many Christian homes on Christmas Day.

The details of kashrut were understandably challenging for my mother. She understood that meat and milk were not to be mixed. But what about chicken? Is that meat? What about cheese? Is that milk?

I usually found a way to eat as much of the food that was offered as I could. When it comes to a contest between peace in the home, shalom bayit, and kashrut, I believed that shalom bayit should win most of the time. I did not want to make my mother uncomfortable if I didn't have to.

When Alice and I visited my family, Alice faced an additional challenge. My family's practices were familiar to me, of course. But Alice had no experience of them. She sometimes had no idea what was going on or what was expected of her.

Alice and I visited my parents for a weekend early in our marriage. On Sunday afternoon, after my parents had returned from church, we chatted over drinks with the guests they had invited for lunch. When we all went to the table, but before we sat down, my mother said, "Now we will have the doxology."

Alice's had never heard that word and did not know what my mother meant.

Everyone else then started singing. The doxology is a Christian prayer. It is often sung as a grace before meals.

Alice and I did not join in. Alice remained silent because she did not know we would be singing and she did not know the song.

I also remained silent. That was partly just to be in solidarity with Alice. In addition, I knew the words of the doxology. And I knew how it ended.

It is very short, just four lines. The first three lines derive from the Psalms and present no theological challenge to Jews. Those three lines are,

Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

Praise Him, all creatures here below.

Praise Him above, ye heavenly host.

That's okay. But the last line of the doxology is, "Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost." I was not going to say that. So I said nothing.

My mother noticed our silence, although we said nothing about it, then or ever. Alice and I remember the moment vividly. It is the kind of moment of awkward tension that comes up for converts visiting the Christian family, whether at Christmas or any other time. Alice and I try to be sensitive, but we won't say or do anything that is just too much in conflict with being Jewish.

In the early years after I converted, I didn't know what to do when someone greeted me by saying "Merry Christmas." Maybe it was said by someone I knew but did not know well. Even if the person knew my name, the name Van Lanckton really does not sound very Jewish.

When someone says, "Merry Christmas," you have two choices. You can reply "Merry Christmas to you." Or you can say something like, "Gee, thanks, but that's not my holiday. I'm Jewish."

When I first converted, I knew I was Jewish but also knew I had been Christian. It was particularly important to me that I demonstrate clearly that I really am Jewish and not Christian. I did not want to respond with a simple "Merry Christmas" if that might imply that I was Christian.

As the years passed, three changes made this less of a problem. I learned that a response saying "that is not my holiday" is quite unwelcome. The other person then has to say, "Oh, I'm sorry." Then you have to say, "No, that's all right." To avoid that awkward exchange, I just got cooler about it and replied with "Merry Christmas to you."

The problem diminished for a second reason: society has increasingly recognized that there are many minority religions. People now generally just say "happy holidays."

And for the last eight years or so, ever since I've been wearing a kippah all the time, not many people mistake me for a Christian.

The early years after conversion presented a more serious problem for me than the question of exchanging Christmas greetings. As a young man, whenever I heard a Christmas carol or other music of Christmas, I would remember very positively the joy and family solidarity that I associated with Christmas. But then I felt very conflicted about my emotional reaction. I felt guilty and embarrassed. I thought, "I should not be feeling this fondness for Christmas; I'm Jewish."

This would happen most powerfully whenever I heard Handel's Messiah. The words are quotes from the Bible story of the birth of Jesus. That's a story whose every word I learned as a child. When I heard those words, and the gorgeous voices that were singing them, I would cry. Then I would try to hide those tears. I would think, "I am a Jew. I'm not supposed to be moved to tears by Handel's Messiah."

Over time, that changed. Gradually I learned that it's okay to recognize that, look, I am fully Jewish, I have been ever since I converted, but of course the memories of my youth are still powerful. Some of that music is so powerfully beautiful it moves me to tears, but that is not a reason to feel guilty. In fact, in about 1990, I finally bought a recording of the music. Now, at this season, I will sit and listen to that music. I may even cry. But I am no longer guilty about that feeling.

And I do know that there's more to those tears than just the beauty of the music. I also do have a sense of loss because of my more distant relationship from my birth family, particularly at Christmas.

Converting to Judaism is a journey. I am still on that journey.

Jewish now for 44 years, I still remember fondly the Christmas celebrations with my original family.

Alice and I have learned how to eat with them. She has learned some of what to expect from them, and she helps us to stay close with them.

I no longer worry about how to return a greeting of "Merry Christmas." And I don't try to fight the feelings I experience when I hear Christmas music.

Today is Christmas Day. It is a holiday for Christians, a day of rare celebration for them.

As a Jew, I am grateful for our very many days of celebration throughout the year. The rabbis regard Shabbat as the most important of them all. It is a day we are commanded both to remember and to guard.

The reference to this day in the Ten Commandments is the only reference in the Commandments to anything that is called holy. And in the creation story, in Genesis, "God rested on the seventh day. God blessed it and declared it holy."

Today, Shabbat, December 25, 2010, is not our holiday.

Today is our holy day.

Today we do not wish each other “Merry Christmas.”

Today we wish each other “Shabbat Shalom.

And now we thank you all, both readers and writers. You have gone out of your way to allow your inner feelings to be stirred. To our creative writers, you have put yourselves out on the line. To our willing readers, we thank you for your indulgence.

We invite all of you to send us your questions, comments or complaints. We also urge everyone to add your voice to our next issue. The deadline for submissions is February 29, 2024. We welcome your story.

Finally, in this desperate time for Israel and the world, we pray for Israel’s victory and a conclusion of the war, an end that provides security to Israel and its neighbors. We pray for mutual security for all nations and general goodwill, but, most of all we pray for Peace.

‘Shield and shelter us beneath the shadow of Your wings. Defend us against enemies, illness, war, famine and sorrow. Watch over us and deliver us. Guard our going and coming, to life and to Peace evermore.’

(An interpolation of the Hashivaneu)

Ralph and Van

