

Selections from *BEKI Bulletin: The Newsletter of Congregation Beth El-Keser Israel*

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Spotlight On Irving Weinstein by Paul Bass

Time was, eight or nine trained voices would help **Irv Weinstein** (*pictured at right*) welcome the Shabbat Queen. Dozens more voices would join him from the rows of BEKI's main sanctuary.

That was when BEKI's population was aging, when nary was heard the peep (or the sudden blasting cry) of a fussing baby or toddler. That was when the biggest Shabbat crowd came to the late Friday night service, not the Saturday morning service.

Irv still leads the late Friday night service. Now it takes place in the cozy chapel. Typically a dozen congregants pray with him. The choir has long stopped helping Irv. Yet Irv hardly feels alone at the reader's table.



"When I'm up there singing I feel like I'm in God's hands," he says. "I'm facing the altar. Everything comes out nice and smooth--most of the time. He's up there with me."

No one who has felt Irv's passion building throughout a Friday evening service, to his booming declaration at Adon Olam's end that God is with him, would doubt it.

Irv has never felt like a performer, singing *for* people. "I'm doing a service for people--and *with* people," he says.

Irv knows from doing service. He has volunteered as BEKI's Friday night cantor for 20 years. He has worked hard as a volunteer for 50 years, first with Congregation Keser Israel, then with BEKI when Keser Israel joined the congregation in a merger. He has also worked tirelessly for the West River Senior Center, his second home. For the last 18 years he has served as the center's president. He organizes trips for the seniors to the Catskills, to shows in New York. He trained a choral group there which performs for seniors at area convalescent homes and synagogues.

"I'm turning 85 on December 30," Irv says proudly as he reminisces one recent morning at his senior center "office" --a card table in the main room. He has his trademark Tweed cap on the table; he keeps on his tan windbreaker to guard against the morning chill. "He let me live until this ripe old age. Knock on wood, I take no medicine of any kind. Knock on wood, I feel pretty good."

...

Irv never took singing lessons. You could say he was born into music. His father, Abraham, was a *kopplemeister* back in Minsk--a bandleader employed by the czar. When revolution took care of the czar, Abraham came to join a brother in New Haven in 1911. So did his wife, Anna. Anna gave birth to Irv in 1913--along with triplet siblings Faye and Harold (who today live at Tower East and in Hamden, respectively).

Abraham continued performing music in between his jobs as a carriage-maker and fish-and-fruit peddler. (He held those jobs at different times in his life. "They wouldn't make a good combination," Irv notes.) Irv emulated his father by singing in choral groups beginning at age nine and by taking up the trumpet.

By 16, all the Weinstein triplets were performing in a band. They played weddings at the old Dorman's Hall on Rose Street as well as at local synagogues. Harold played slide trombone, Faye, French horn. Irv, like Abraham, blew the trumpet--and, of course, served as *kopplemeister*.

Irv continued singing in his adult years while he managed the old Barker's discount store in Orange, then the Corvette's in Trumbull. "They went out of business, and I retired." He retired from paying work, but devoted more time than ever to his synagogue and his senior center.

At times he has thought of giving up the Friday night BEKI gig. He'll feel tired. "Then something inside of me says no. I guess I'll keep going until I can't do it anymore."

He wouldn't mind seeing more people attending late Friday night services. But he's thrilled at the infusion into BEKI of younger, new families, whose schedules often lead them to attend Saturday morning. Weinstein remembers when BEKI appeared to be dying years back, when no young people joined. Especially not children. Now the synagogue teems with new life, new energy, as well as new rhythms. "That," Irv observes, "makes it a healthy place."

So does a passionate voice of tradition.

Torah for the Hungry Mind

Practical Kashrut 101

Practical Kashrut 101 is a 4-week course in the basic principles of kashrut, the Jewish dietary laws of keeping kosher. Classes meet Sunday mornings from 9:30a to 10:45a in BEKI's Rosenkrantz Library on 8, 15, 22 November and 6 December, with Rabbi Tilsen. To pre-register and for reading assignments call 389-2108 ext. 14.

New at BEKI: Weekday Learners' Service

There's something new at BEKI on Wednesday nights. On Wednesdays, the 5:45p Maariv evening service has been enhanced with commentary and practice, becoming a "Learners' Minyan - Weekday Edition." Students from the upper grades of the United Hebrew School attend and participate in the service.

Shabbat Shalom Learners' Minyan

The "Shabbat Shalom Learners' Minyan," which meets every other Saturday morning at 10:45a in BEKI's Rosenkrantz Library, is an ideal setting for veteran and novice shul-goers alike to become more comfortable and expert in the Shaharit (morning) and Torah services in a supportive setting. Lead by Steven Fraade and Rabbi Alan Lovins, the Shabbat Shalom Learners' Minyan has helped many feel a deeper sense of awe born of greater understanding while increasing the level of comfort through nurturing step-by-step practice in a non-threatening multi-generational setting.

Rashi Study Group

Each Monday morning from 7:45a to 8:30a a small group of adults meets in the Rabbi's Study to read Rashi's commentary to the Torah. It is possible to join the study for a single meeting or to begin at any time. Knowledge of Hebrew is not necessary. For more information, don't call; just come once and find out what it is about.

Pirque Avot Study Begins Shabbat Afternoon

Join us every Shabbat afternoon following Mincha afternoon service during fall and winter for a twenty-minute Pirque Avot Study session. Study and discuss this early collection of wise sayings of our sages, also known as "Mishna Avot" or as "Avot." "Pirque" means chapters or quotations; "avot" means "of the

ancestors." Avot was edited in the second century of the common era by Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi and contains material from that period as well as from several centuries earlier. As Hillel says, "Do not say, 'When I have leisure, I will study,' for you may never have leisure" (Avot, 2:5). That's the same Hillel who says, "If not now, when?" (Avot, 1:14).

A Message from Rabbi Tilsen

Walk Like an Egyptian

There may be little harm in occasionally "walking like an Egyptian" while dancing to the popular song by that name, but regularly walking like an Egyptian may be a violation of the mitzva "ke-ma`ase eretz mitzraim lo ta`asu -- After the doings of the land of Egypt wherein you dwelt you shall not do..." (Lev. 18:3). The context indicates that not only moral crimes such as incest and bestiality are included, but also cultural norms such as hairstyle and manner of dress.

Rabbi Moses Maimonides, in his Code of Law written some 800 years ago, bases the following law on this passage: "One does not follow the ways of the other nations nor does one imitate them, neither in dress or hairstyle or in other such matters.... All of [these verses] say that a Jew must be careful not to look like them, but rather be distinct from them and recognizable in dress and other ways" (Meda, AZ 11:1).

The maximalist interpretation holds that we must follow customs that are "different for the sake of being different" from those of our neighbors. This applies to all areas of life, including dress, hairstyles, table manner and even the way we walk.

This interpretation emphasizes the values of cultural distinctness, in part with the aim of instilling a sense of pride in Jewish identity. Those who have been eager to jettison their traditional ways in the hope of "fitting in" better in America gave an implicit message that something is wrong with being identifiable as a Jew, of looking too Jewish, thereby reinforcing the anti-Semitic notion that Jews and Judaism are bad.

Although seen by some as condescending, this emphasis on distinctiveness is in keeping with the new trend to affirm the value of cultural diversity. Abandoning the model of the "melting pot," groups such as the ADL and NAACP have been promoting the idea that Americans need to learn to respect other cultures within America in order for all to live together peacefully. Making fun of ethnic names or ethnic dress is no longer acceptable.

In this context of renewed Jewish pride and affirmation of the legitimacy and desirability of cultural diversity, some Jews have adopted a "Jewish" look, most notably the wearing of a kippa (skullcap) or Star of David. The kippa in America is as much a sign of ethnic identity and pride as it is a sign of religious commitment. The battle for the right of Jews to wear a kippa in the courtroom or in the Armed Forces was important as a battle for the right of cultural diversity more than religious freedom, this being especially the case for Judaism which traditionally has not usually thought of "religious" and "secular" as separate realms.

The story is told of a man on a train seeing another with the black coat, black hat and full beard. "What's the matter with you people? This is America in the 20th century, not Poland in the 17th. We Jews don't live in the ghetto anymore; we're free to look and dress as we

please. You're a throwback to medieval times and as a fellow Jew I have to say that you are an embarrassment to us all."

"Actually, sir, I'm Amish, not Jewish."

"Oh. You know I have the greatest respect for you people...."

Another reading understands the law to prohibit us from actively copying foreign ways, without requiring us to go out of our way to be different. Examples of foreign ways given in our sources are wearing red clothing or adopting other fashions that have some meaning in the gentile culture. By this thinking, if we sometimes do things the way it is done in other cultures it is of no concern, as long as in general we don't copy their ways. We need not pay attention to whether we look like others; we just need to be sure that our fashions are not consciously developing to look like theirs.

Let's say it is 1961 and Jews observe that hats are going out of fashion. If Jews stop wearing hats for that reason, it would be a violation of this Torah rule. But if Jews independently conclude that wearing a hat all the time is inconvenient, expensive or uncomfortable, it would be permitted to stop wearing them. The essential point is that Jewish practices develop according to their internal dynamics, not in order to mimic the surrounding culture.

Halakha (Jewish law) has often incorporated elements from other law systems. Torah law has been influenced by Babylonian law and then Roman law. When the ketuba, the marriage contract, was radically reformulated in the first century BCE, the new form was modeled on the Egyptian document of that day. The sages did not say, "Hey, the Egyptians are a great and powerful nation, so let's copy their marriage contract," but rather Shimon ben Shatah and another sage familiar with the issues said, "Here are some sensible changes we should make to our marriage contract." Take the good ideas but not the bad, and promote those ideas as being worthy on their own merit, not because they are copied from others. Or in another realm, let Israel share science and medicine. But who needs McDonalds or Burger Ranch?

Some years ago I spent a few weeks in a rural village in Botswana. The village had only seven telephones, one television, two bottle stores, one butcher, one general store, one school, a part-time infirmary, and a disco. After having had several conversations with one of the school teachers I noticed something peculiar about his eyeglasses: They had no lenses! He explained that he wears them because glasses make people look smart, as they are associated with Americans, Whites and the powerful and wealthy.

According to a minimalist interpretation of the Scriptural prohibition, we must simply be careful not to copy foreign ways that are actually harmful or immoral. Wearing red clothes (for men) was considered immodest, or possibly representative of a sexually-alternate lifestyle, so we shouldn't do it, even though it was in vogue. Other than that, if there is no specific problem with a hairdo or style of dress, there would be no reason not to adopt it.

Some have seen positive reasons to actively adopt the styles of other cultures. It's hard enough to be a Jew as it is. Why would we want to wear a sign that says, "Hey I'm a Jew," which anti-Semites might read to say, "Kick me." Why call attention to ourselves, especially for non-essential reasons? Why invite discrimination, insults, attacks? Why foster additional divisions among people? Why not just fit in and look and act like everybody else, just leave the cheese off the cheeseburger? Indeed, wouldn't the world be nice if people could judge us by what we say or what we do, and not be distracted by ethnic customs?

This approach seems to offer physical safety, and for many, emotional safety. But it is probably not Torah-true in that it ignores the sense and context of the prohibition. If differences are really a problem, then let others adopt our ways. Being confident and firm in our ways shows others and ourselves that we believe in traditional Jewish culture.

Historians have wondered if we really were in Egypt for 400 years. After all, there are virtually no traces of Egyptian words in our language; no Egyptian cultural practices; no Egyptian styles. Just as post-colonial cultures underwent revolution to rid themselves of their oppressors' customs, our ancestors might have vigorously performed the mitzva of "*ke-ma`ase eretz mitzraim lo ta`asu* -- After the doings of the land of Egypt wherein you dwelt you shall not do...."

Dear Rabbi: Answers, Advice and Helpful Household Hints

Dear Rabbi,

Is a brit mila of a newborn different if the mother is not Jewish?

Signed, Preparing for Yom Clipper

Dear Clipper,

Let us skip all the bris jokes and cut right to the point.

The medical aspect is the same, and the ceremony may follow the same order as for an infant born to a Jewish mother. The blessings and language for a conversion are substituted in some places. Since the brit mila is performed for the purpose of conversion, it must be so noted on the certificate. The conversion is not complete until the child has undergone tevila (immersion in a miqva) and accepts the responsibilities of an adult Jew, under the supervision of a duly constituted beit din (religious court). This brit mila need not take place on the eighth day (although that may be desirable), and so cannot take place on Shabbat or a festival.

Dear Rabbi,

I'm planning a simha for the fall of 1999. Will the holidays be early or late next year?

Signed, Plan Ahead

Dear Ahead,

The holidays will be right on time.

Dear Rabbi,

I'm embarrassed to ask. What is the difference between *shluggin kapores* and *tashlikh*?

Signed, Afraid to Ask

Dear Chicken,

Kapores is the bird, *tashlikh* is the stuffing.

Planning a bar- or bat-mitzva at BEKI?

Parents planning a bar- or bat-mitzva observance at BEKI during the next three years are urged to call the BEKI office (389-2108 ext. 14) to reserve a date and to request a copy of the [Guide to Benei Mitzva Observance at Congregation Beth El-Keser Israel](#).

BEKI Budget Update

The BEKI Board of Directors is pleased to announce that the synagogue balanced its operating budget for the fiscal year ending 30 June 1998, ending several years of deficit spending. The Board expresses its appreciation to our members and supporters for their contributions over the past year.

Alicia Hopkinson, Bat Mitzva in November

Alicia Hopkinson, daughter of Jim and Liann Hopkinson, will participate in services and be called to the Torah as a bat mitzva on Friday 6 November during the 8:00p service and on Saturday 7 November during the 9:15a services. Alicia is a graduate of the United Hebrew School, and is a granddaughter of BEKI [Sisterhood](#) President Adele Tyson and the late David Tyson.

Darshan in November

Drew Alexander will serve as darshan (Torah commentator) on Shabbat morning 14 November during the 9:15a morning service.

LifeCycle

HaMaqom Yenaheem Etkhem:

We Mourn the Passing of **Ethel Deutsch Goldstein**, sister of Betty Zelen; **Helen Sarna**, sister of Bertha Fleischer; and **Seymour Kaltman**, brother of Muriel Kaltman.

May the memory of our departed be for a blessing.

Mazal Tov to:

Gerald & Judith Oppenheim on the birth of twin granddaughters Georgia & Louisa Oppenheim in September.

Liora and Yaron Lew on the birth of their daughter Maya on 11 September 1998, and to big sisters Daphni and Dana.

New Address: **Shoshana Zax, John Weiser, Sam and Ariel** have relocated to 428 Yale Avenue, New Haven, CT 06515, (203) 389-0931, zaxweiser@aol.com.

For more information contact:

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