

A Conversation with Michael Paley

William Novak

It makes me feel old to say it, but Michael Paley and I have been good friends for more than forty years. We met when I moved to the Boston area in the fall of 1970 to join Havurat Shalom Community Seminary, as it was known then, and to become a graduate student in Jewish Studies at Brandeis. Paley, a Brandeis undergraduate, was a regular at the Havurah, although at the time he was too young to be a member. We came to know each other as we drove between Havurat Shalom in Somerville and the Brandeis campus in Waltham.

He went on to attend the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia and Yeshivat HaMivtar in Jerusalem, and to do graduate work in Jewish and Islamic philosophy and science at Temple University. In 1981, he was one of the first students to receive smichah [ordination] from Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. After becoming a rabbi, he served as the Jewish chaplain at Dartmouth College; a dean at Bard College, where he taught Jewish studies; and the university chaplain at Columbia. He founded the Edgar M. Bronfman Youth Fellowship program in Israel, and was a vice president of the Wexner Heritage Program, where he continues to teach. Since late 1997 he has been the Pearl and Ira Meyer Scholar in Residence at UJA-Federation of New York, where he does a good deal of teaching, which is what he is best known for.

Rabbi Paley lives in New York with his wife, Anny Dobrejcer. They have three grown children: Briyah, Naamah, and Gabe.

This interview was prompted by a conversation on a Martha's Vineyard beach in the summer of 2011. It continued as a series of telephone calls over the



Photo: David Katzenstein

next three months, most of which began with our shared dismay over the increasingly sad state of the Boston Red Sox. What follows is an edited version of those conversations.

Before we talk about your life, I'd like to start with the five enduring, secular Jewish values you outlined to me on the beach. By "secular," I think you mean values that are common to both practicing Jews and to those who have little interest in faith, ritual, or observance. What got you interested in this subject?

In 2002, a population study of the Jews of New York showed that a surprisingly large number — more than 20% — were relatively recent immigrants, or the children of immigrants, from the former Soviet Union. As the rabbi at UJA, I realized that I should be reaching out to this group. I soon gave a talk at a Brooklyn JCC to Russian Jews who were mostly in their twenties. I spoke in my usual informal style about the Biblical Joseph, and it seemed to go well. When I was finished, somebody said, "That was really interesting. But who is Joseph?"

"You know, from the Torah," I said.

"We don't know the Torah," he said. "We thought he was somebody you knew!"

It was clear that this group did not divide along the categories I was used to. They weren't religious, or anti-religious, or even indifferent; they were pretty much unaware of religion. They didn't have much that was real or compelling about Judaism other than anti-Semitism and a close family connection to Israel. I was used to teaching people who were more connected, who could at least remember the awful time they'd had in Hebrew school. I wanted to find Jewish values they could relate to, because they weren't likely to stay Jewish because of kashrut or Shabbat. I wanted them to know that these values were as Jewish as kippot and *talleisim* [prayer shawls], and that secular Jews had as much to contribute to the Jewish future as religious Jews do.

Speaking to the Russians was the first step. The second step was that now that my kids were in their late twenties, they and their friends, and the kids of my friends, were often in romantic relationships with non-Jews. We, the parents, were trying to come to terms with the possibility of intermarriage — either literally, or culturally. Many of these boyfriends and girlfriends

seemed to be what I started to think of as *near-Jews*, people from other religious traditions whose values were much like our own. I'd like to make the boundaries of Judaism more porous. Either our children will leak out, or other people's children will leak in, and of course I prefer the latter.

Which was another reason to identify some secular Jewish values.

Yes, although "secular Jewish values" isn't always a popular construct. Tribal Jews who are themselves secular don't care for the effort to look for common points, because either you're a "real" Jew or you aren't. And most observant Jews don't like it, because to them Judaism is either mitzvah-based or it isn't.

You're taking a more pragmatic approach.

I think so, although I understand the objections very well. Look, I love going to shul, and the whole religious apparatus really works for me. But that's not true for everybody.

And outside of Orthodoxy, the trend is moving in the secular direction.

That's the reality I'm trying to respond to. I was talking to a man at a UJA event who said, "I'm really not very Jewish." I asked him what he meant, and he said he didn't do "any religious stuff." I asked him about his job, and he said he was a neonatal oncologist. His work was saving infants after other people had given up on them. "What about the other doctors in your group?" He said, "Come to think of it, they're all Jewish." He thought he wasn't Jewish because other people have defined what it means to be Jewish. But what about the injunction to choose life? He was playing out the Jewish narrative even if he didn't realize it. In a post-ritual world, some of these secular values are a continuation of our fundamental religious values.

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or other people's children will leak in,
and of course I prefer the latter.

The First Value

Although we can only scratch the surface of a subject you've given some serious thought to, let's see what a series of secular Jewish values might look like. You have identified five. Where do you start?

I begin with our intellectual tradition, our commitment to the life of the mind. As everyone knows, we are a people of books and ideas. We believe in translating the world into words, and we believe in learning. As I learned from reading Rav [Joseph B.] Soloveitchik, we refer to our greatest Biblical leader not as *Moshe HaNavi* [Moses, our prophet] or *Moshe Malkeinu* [our leader or king], but as *Moshe Rabbeinu* — our teacher. Not even *the* teacher, but *our* teacher. Everyone gets to participate in the process of learning.

Is that “everyone” unique to Judaism?

It's at least unusual. Through most of Christian history, religious knowledge belonged to the elite. Holy books were locked up in monasteries, and libraries were reserved for the initiated. In Islam, students were forbidden to offer an opinion until they had reached a certain level of knowledge. Contrast that with the Biblical phrase, *mamlechet kohanim*, a kingdom of priests, which refers to the entire people.

Among Catholics, the priests, who had the most learning, constituted the intellectual class. And they weren't allowed to have children, whereas among Jews it was considered an honor to marry your daughter to a rabbi or scholar, which strengthened the intellectual component of Judaism.

Yes, and local and regional Jewish communities made a point of supporting a rabbi or scholar, and a *beit midrash* [study hall]. They also made sure that the children of every town, or at least the boys, learned to read Hebrew so they could study the holy books.

And interpret them, too. All our texts have commentaries, which are almost as important as the texts they illuminate.

And those commentaries are often in conflict. The Talmud is full of argument and dissent, and yet it's considered a holy book. After an especially long debate between the followers of Hillel and the followers of Shammai, we are told, *Eilu v'eilu divrei Elohim hayim* — both these comments and those are the words of the living God.

So we are intellectually argumentative. What are some other qualities of our intellectual style?

Outside of mysticism, Jews have always been concerned with worldly and even mundane topics. And we have never been especially concerned with the afterlife. In *Halakhic Man*, Soloveitchik writes that Jewish law is not concerned with a transcendent world, that we prefer this world, where we have the opportunity to create, act, and accomplish things.

Here is how he puts it, and more strongly than I expected: "A religiosity that centers upon the heavenly kingdom and not upon the earthly kingdom... gives rise to ecclesiastical tyranny, religious aristocracies, and charismatic personalities. And there is nothing that the Halakhah loathes and despises as much as the idea of cultic mediation or the choosing of individuals, on the basis of supernatural considerations, to be intercessors for the community.... No person, according to the Halakhah, needs the aid of others in order to approach God." So we have not only a reality-based system, but a democratic one.

Yes, and here's an example of the realism: Because the Talmud is so vast and unorganized, Maimonides wrote the *Mishneh Torah*, an exhaustive code of Jewish law. Again and again, as he goes through the laws, he brings up the case of how this or that ruling would apply to a hermaphrodite. When you read him, you ask yourself: Were there really so many hermaphrodites? Of course not. It's that Maimonides wanted to cover every possibility. That's what I mean by "exhaustive." It was the same approach that would later lead Einstein to discover relativity.

That sounds like a leap.

The issue is oneness. When you have a radical sense of reality-based oneness, you have to account for everything, and you have to be persistent in that drive. Isaac Newton accounted for the world in pieces. Einstein wanted to include everything, to create a grand unified field theory. Freud had a similar approach: he believed that *all* our thoughts were significant, including the ones we prefer not to acknowledge.

And what about the democratic component of our intellectual life? Judaism doesn't ask everyone to be an intellectual or a scholar.

Judaism wants Jews to be literate, and people want to learn. Sophisticated Jews tend to dismiss *Fiddler on the Roof*, but the musical got a lot of things right. Tevye wants to be a rich man, and what does he imagine? In addition to having a beautiful house, he'll have the opportunity to learn! He sings, "And I'd discuss the holy books with the learned men, several hours every day / That would be the sweetest thing of all."

I gave a drash recently about the Biblical figure of Yitro [Jethro], and I think he fits into the democracy of ideas and the breaking down of hierarchies. Do you agree?

Definitely. The high priest of the Midianites comes in from the outside and tells Moses, “Wait a minute, you’re running this community all wrong! Here’s how you should organize the justice system.” It’s amazing that Moses is criticized in the Torah — and by a foreigner. And he accepts it.

There is nothing inherent in Judaism
that denies the truths of other religions.

Because Yitro is right.

The Torah makes that clear. Actually, God makes that clear. The message is that it’s the truth that matters, not the person’s power, status, or background. And that’s a central Jewish belief, although it’s not uniquely Jewish.

So sometimes we need corrections from outside our own society.

Yes. We value our religion, but we don’t claim that it answers every question. Not everyone will agree with this statement, but there is nothing inherent in Judaism that denies the truths of other religions — or, for example, the ability of non-Jews to receive prophecy. Yitro is enlightened, and our tradition includes Balaam as a prophet.

So you don’t believe that Judaism holds an exclusive truth.

I can’t imagine a God who would give a revelation to just one little group. What about the billions of people around the world who have never even heard of Jews? I see religions as different paths up the same mountain. As the mountain narrows, other paths come into view because we’re coming closer to God. But no tradition, including ours, takes you all the way up. The last step to God is one you have to take yourself.

We’ve been talking about the past, but I know that these days you’re turning your attention to modern, secular Jewish writers and artists and trying to identify a common intellectual heritage.

I’m interested in what happened when we started applying our minds to subjects that the rest of the Western world was also grappling with. In our ongoing attempt to build an exhaustive set of explanations, we have always been committed to thinking, arguing, investigating, searching for deeper

meanings, and challenging received opinions. And when we started shining those lights on other disciplines — whether it was literature, mathematics, psychology, physics, medicine, economics, law, or business, to name just a few — the results were pretty good. For the past couple of years I’ve been teaching a course on non-religious Jews like Spinoza, Freud, Einstein, Kafka, Brandeis, and Chagall.

The Second Value

I love talking about that first value, but we have to move on to the second one.

I call this one Global Connection, which has become almost a buzzword in recent years.

We had it early.

But we didn’t choose it. The Torah describes the patriarchs as wanderers, but global connection really starts with our first exile.

The Egyptian slavery?

I’m thinking of our first national exile, when we were already a people, which occurred around 722 BC when the Assyrians destroyed the Northern Kingdom. Later, when the Babylonians conquered the Assyrians, the ten lost tribes became part of the Babylonian empire.

Didn’t they assimilate?

Some did, but many retained the memory of being Israelites. When the First Temple was destroyed a hundred and fifty years later, the newly-exiled Jews from the southern kingdom met up with the descendants of the earlier exiles, who regarded the newer arrivals as uncultured. When the Babylonian Jews returned to the Land of Israel in 538, they in turn referred to the Jews who had never left as *amei ha-arets* — literally, people of the land.

Which soon came to mean uneducated and unworldly.

Yes. One difference was that the Jews who survived exile had developed a more sophisticated understanding of monotheism.

More sophisticated than what?

Than the monotheism of the Torah, which was really monolatry.

Monolatry?

It’s a great word that I learned a few years ago from a drash in our minyan. It means that although you worship one God, you don’t deny the existence of other gods for other nations. Anyway, then the Persians conquer

the Babylonians, and some of the Jews end up in Susa, or Shushan, as the Bible calls it. By then, Jews are already living in many places, which is why Mordecai, in the Book of Esther, is able to understand the two plotters against the king, who are speaking a foreign language. The Talmud calls him Mordecai Bilshan — master of languages. Many years later, in the late 19th century, it was a Polish Jew named L. L. Zamenhof who invented Esperanto, a new language that was meant to facilitate international communication.

Which wasn't very successful.

Right, because early on, pretty much the only people who wanted to learn Esperanto were Jews.

When you talk about global Jewish connection, are you getting to the idea of Kol Yisrael areivim zeh ba-zeh — that all Jews are bound up with and responsible for one another?

I would translate *areivim* as “stuck together.” Because we are a global people, we have found and trusted one another throughout many lands. The fact that our rituals are similar around the world has made that process much easier.

Maybe we weren't as good with money as people thought.

Maybe what we were good at was travel and communication.

You arrive in a strange city and you look for the shul.

And if you can trust strangers in other countries, because you have something in common with them, that's a real advantage — especially in business. Merchants used to carry sacks of gold on their travels, which was not only cumbersome, but dangerous. But if you went to shul and were given an aliyah, and you knew the brakhah, you were trusted. So now, instead of shlepping around a sack of silver or gold, that same merchant could bring a letter of credit — which was the equivalent of a checkbook. Maybe we weren't as good with money as people thought. Maybe what we were good at was travel and communication.

Are you saying that exile has been good for the Jews?

I'm saying that along with the calamities and destruction that exile has produced, there have been some secondary gains. Ever since the Babylonian period, we have learned and absorbed valuable things from the communi-

ties around us. Global connection has made us cosmopolitan, and that's a good thing.

Can I assume that Israel is part of how you understand the Jewish global connection?

Yes, although Zionism, which arose out of 19th century nationalism, represented a certain giving up on global community in light of unrelenting anti-Semitism.

Which turned out to be right, in view of what happened to the Jews of Europe in the 20th century.

Lord Acton famously said that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. I used to listen to tapes of Yitz [Rabbi Irving] Greenberg as I drove to my job teaching Hebrew school, and I remember him saying that in order to avoid corruption, the Jewish community had dedicated itself to powerlessness. But in the 1930s and '40s, he continued, we slipped into absolute powerlessness, and we found that it, too, was corrupting — in a deadly way. There's no high moral ground when you can't protect your children.

In 1932, Ben-Gurion spoke about the threat of physical and spiritual annihilation — he used those words — looming over the Jews of Europe. As early as 1934, he said the Nazi regime endangered the entire Jewish people. He predicted that Hitler would start a war in Europe, and that during this war he would annihilate the Jews. Not many people were saying that in 1934.

But prophecy without power isn't much good.

Right. It's very nice to have global connections, but if people are going to be persecuted, it might be good to have not only a place to run to, but a global Jewish authority to tell them to leave — quite forcefully, if necessary.

As for returning to the land, I like the formulation of Rav Kook [the great mystic and a founding figure of religious Zionism], who wrote that the Jews exploded into exile and ended up everywhere, where they absorbed everything — communism, capitalism, modernity, secularism, you name it, and lived in places as different as Germany and Ethiopia. And now they were returning to a kind of laboratory, where we would see how human beings could co-exist if you brought all these tensions or “alienations,” as he put it, into a single place and tried to make a country out of them. I think it's going pretty well.

You've always been interested in Rav Kook.

Yes, and it's long been my secret fantasy to collect his recipes for what I would call *The Rav Kook Cook Book*, which would feature only vegetarian

dishes. On a more serious note, Rav Kook used to insist that the secular Jews of Palestine, as the country was known in his day, were as important as the religious ones — that both the secular Jewish workers and the religious establishment were doing holy work. I feel the same way, and I wish we heard that view more often from the Orthodox world.

Perhaps the best exemplar of global community was the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who had *shluchim* [emissaries] all over the world, including the most unlikely places. They would come to Brooklyn and report to him, which gave him a great deal of global information and forged his understanding of the world. Beyond that, all kinds of people came to see the Rebbe, including many secular Jews. The Lubavitchers are relatively non-judgmental about people's religious observance, which may be why they're so successful around the globe.

The Third Value

The third value is probably the most challenging, because it fits a common anti-Semitic stereotype. What shall we call it?

I call it prosperity. In our traditional texts, and in our history, there is an acceptance of material wellbeing which is unusual in religion. There is very little condemnation of wealth, and no idealizing of poverty.

Or, going back to Tevye, "It's no great shame to be poor, but it's no great honor, either."

That's right. The Torah seems to go out of its way to make clear that the patriarchs were all wealthy. There is a fair amount about their wealth, including lists of cattle and dimensions of real estate. And Joseph's talents are primarily economic. He has a real business head, and the great capitalist becomes a great socialist when the situation demands it.

By the way, Joseph is blessed not only with economic talents, but also psychological and political abilities. His weakness is that he's bad at determining when each perspective is appropriate. The Torah tells us that he is seventeen at the time of his early dreams, and thirty when he stands before Pharaoh. What if the early dreams he describes to his brothers were really about economics and the future? Sheaves of wheat flopping over could mean that a famine is coming, and the dream of thirteen astronomical objects —

eleven stars, the sun and the moon, may not mean what everyone assumes — including his family. What if it was a prophecy that Joseph didn't yet understand, that his awareness of the famine would come in thirteen years?

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the pursuit of comfort and prosperity is a good thing,
but for much of the world, it's a new idea.

Let's return to the issue of prosperity. Anti-Semites have attacked Jews for two opposite reasons — our conspicuous success with capitalism, and our frequent advocacy of socialism. But they are both reactions to the same human problems, which brings to mind the famous line in Pirke Avot: Im ein kemach, ein Torah. If there is no flour, or no money, there is no learning. Then comes the reverse formulation: If there is no Torah, there is no flour.

You might have expected that the second formulation would come first, but there's that realism again.

Freud points out in *Moses and Monotheism* that many cultures have a myth of a young man whose circumstances are switched: the prince becomes a pauper and is enriched, as it were, by the experience. We have that story in reverse: Moses, the young slave, is brought up in the Pharaoh's palace, and then returns to free the slaves. He comes from poverty, moves into wealth, and then returns to bring his people out of slavery.

And living in wealth didn't seem to have hurt him. The other day I looked up the famous New Testament line that it's easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, and I found that it appears in three of the four Gospels. We have nothing like that in Judaism, do we?

We often assume that everybody shares the view that the pursuit of comfort and prosperity is a good thing, but for much of the world, it's a new idea. You know the old saying, "I've been rich and I've been poor, and believe me, rich is better"? The joke is that it's obvious. But it hasn't been obvious to everyone.

Of the five values you talk about, this one is the most surprising. What made you think of it?

It's probably a result of teaching wealthy students at UJA-Federation, although I also teach people who work in various agencies, and rabbis, and Russians, some of whom are poor. Now, there *are* negative statements about wealth in our tradition, too, especially from the Prophets. But it's not that they are opposed to prosperity. What they're against is the hoarding of wealth and the abandonment of the needy.

And in the Talmud, aren't some of the sages rich?

Sure, like Rabbi Tarfon, Rabbi Yochanan, and Rabban Gamliel. Also Akiva, although he came from real poverty. Other sages, like Hillel and Rabbi Yehoshua, were poor.

But there is no value judgment placed on their wealth or their poverty.

I think that's right. As a people, we've had more experience with poverty than with wealth, but there have been plenty of exceptions. We've had four great diasporas, and in three of them we've had a fair amount of prosperity: Babylonia during the time of the Talmud; the Golden Age of Spain from the 7th to the 13th century; Eastern Europe from the 16th century to the 20th, where there was plenty of poverty, which was one reason so many Eastern European Jews eventually came to America; and America, from the middle of the 17th century until today, where we have been especially fortunate.

You said earlier that global community accounts for some of our success in business.

We seem to be good at opening up markets. In nineteenth-century Odessa, where we were 4% of the population, Jews accounted for more than 50% of the grain exchange. We have a tradition of extending credit to our co-religionists. The shipping of goods and services from one place to another was all based on contacts, on communicating information, speaking different languages, sending letters, and keeping records. *A Journey to the End of the Millennium*, a novel by A.B. Yehoshua, is a colorful account of Jews and international commerce in the late 10th century.

What else comes into play here? The standard explanation is that when Jews weren't allowed to own land, we turned to other forms of commerce, and especially to money-lending, which was often closed to Christians. In his book about the Rothschilds, Niall Ferguson calls that "the least unsatisfactory answer." In Jewish Mystique, Ernest Van den Haag offers his own reasons. First, that Jews did not face the same religious prohibitions against lending money with interest, so we became economic Shabbos goys, performing duties the authorities wanted

done, but could not do themselves. Second, that economic power was virtually the only power available to us. And finally, that a homeless people already accustomed to dealing with abstract ideas was suited to working with money, which is a homeless and abstract commodity.

Another part of the answer is that over time, Jews haven't automatically passed down the family business to the oldest son, but rather, to the son — and until recently, it was always a son — who had the talent to run it. We believed in a meritocracy.

Of course this whole subject makes people uneasy. You know that song people sing at Havdalah, with the line, Zareinu v'khaspeinu yarbeh ka-chol [may our offspring and our money increase like the sand]? As long as I can remember, some people have substituted shlomeinu — our peace — for kaspeinu because they were uncomfortable with the idea of wishing for wealth. Apparently this discomfort goes way back. Thanks to Google, I learned that the Vilna Gaon didn't care for it either. He changed it to zareinu u'z'khuyoteinu — our offspring and our merits.

Although we recognize the liabilities and dangers of wealth, we appreciate it anyway. We also have laws that insist on generosity from people of means, and other laws about avoiding conspicuous consumption. And as you mentioned, the talent of some Jews for making money has often led to problems and persecution. But one reason I'm hopeful for the future is that more and more people around the world have become interested in prosperity and believe it is within their grasp — or within the grasp of their children. People who seek prosperity are more inclined to be interested in peace. If the Palestinians in Gaza were interested in prosperity, the war would be over tomorrow. But when Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2006, the Palestinians immediately demolished the greenhouses, which was one way to keep the war simmering.

The Fourth Value

What's next?

The fourth value, tzedakah, is closely linked to wealth, because wealth carries certain obligations. Without tzedakah, it's just greed. Of course, the obligation to be generous applies just as much to those without much wealth.

I remember a Talmudic citation that I learned from Danny Siegel, the great tzedakah teacher: "Even a poor person who receives tzedakah must give

from what he receives.” And elsewhere, “Two poor people may exchange their tzedakah money with each other.”

I’ve actually seen that principle in action. In Jerusalem’s Meah Shearim neighborhood, beggars give little pieces of metal to other beggars. These use the tabs from aluminum soda cans, which have no value at all. But at least they’re giving something, even if it’s only symbolic, and they’re participating in a culture of giving.

Would you agree that this is one value that Jews have really lived up to? There’s a famous quote from Maimonides, who said he had never seen, or even heard of, a Jewish community that didn’t have a tzedakah fund.

That’s probably still true today. It was usually done on a local level, but in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Council of Four Lands, a central Jewish authority in Poland, provided for a tax so that every community would have a shul, a mikvah, a school, a rabbi, and so on. The Council was the precursor of the modern Jewish federation. Essential services included not just food on the table, but once again, the opportunity to learn — especially for gifted students.

But whether it’s a beggar on the street, or two equally worthy institutions, it can be hard to determine who should be the recipient.

You give tzedakah to those who are worthy of receiving it — to *aniyim hagunim*, the deserving poor. But because it’s so difficult to make those decisions, you give to everybody. There’s a line in the Talmud: if a man standing in front of a tavern asks you for money, and you know he’s going to drink, you give him something anyway.

You work for a charitable organization, so you probably have a pretty good idea of how complicated all of this can be.

All of these values can get out of balance, and any of them have the potential to be destructive. Communities that cared only about wealth have ended in disaster. A global community with no power can end in tragedy. When communities are committed to learning and little else, they can become impoverished, which happens in parts of the Haredi world. I have access to that world, and much of it is beautiful, but I can’t overlook all the distress — emotional, economic, and philosophical.

You have to teach people to work. Tzedakah can save lives, but it can also create a culture of dependence. The Talmudic sages had real jobs, and so did other great thinkers. Rashi was a winemaker, and Maimonides was a doctor.

So too much tzedakah can be dangerous to the recipient.

Yes. And at the other end of the spectrum we have a different, but equally serious, abuse of tzedakah — when rich people who have made their money in morally questionable or completely dishonest ways use some of their gains to buy forgiveness, or good press. Bernie Madoff was a big giver to Jewish causes. Tzedakah is filled with complex problems that I wasn't really aware of before I came to UJA.

The Fifth Value

And finally, your summary of secular Jewish belief.

Which I like to call: One God or less.

A maximum of one.

Yes. Imagine that your kid comes home one day and announces that she no longer believes in God. You wouldn't be shocked. But if she comes home and tells you she believes in multiple gods, you might be concerned.

Not all Jews believe in God, but we believe that life has meaning. Whether or not we believe in a providential God who influences daily events in the world, almost none of us believes that the entire purpose of life is to eat, drink, and be merry.

One way of affirming the meaning of life is through memory, and we can re-enter the past on a regular basis. In the Friday night kiddush we remember two great events: the Exodus from Egypt, which created our people, and the first Shabbat.

So we can have meaning without mitzvot?

I can't, but a lot of people can. For many Jews, the meaning has replaced the rules. Some people believe that mitzvot are the basis for morality, but there are other paths to morality. Moral systems are fine, but Judaism is not primarily a moral system.

So there's no Torah on one foot?

I've always preferred Shammai's response, which was more honest. Hillel gave a moral answer to the heathen who wanted an explanation of Judaism while standing on one foot, namely, Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you. That was nice, but Shammai gave a true answer, which I imagine was, "Don't bother me with silly questions while I'm trying to build something. Put your foot down and get serious."

Shammai was building something?

We read that he chased the heathen away with a builder's rule. If we'd had only Hillel's answer, without Shammai's, Judaism wouldn't have lasted, because moral systems are available elsewhere — like in Christianity. To me, Shammai was saying, "Do you think we're such a cheap tradition that I can sum it up in a single line? There's no immediate enlightenment in Judaism. We're working out the entire structure of reality!"

To me, Shammai was saying,
 "Do you think we're such a cheap tradition
 that I can sum it up in a single line?"

I've been thinking about how to remember these five values. The acronyms in the Haggadah for the Ten Plagues, D'tzakh Adash B'achav — is that formulation supposed to be helpful? It's probably easier to remember the actual plagues! But with only five values, if you'll allow me to call the third one Comfort, and to re-arrange the order, they are: Comfort, Inquiry (or Intellectualism), Tzedakah, Global connection, and One god or less. The result, which I present in your honor as a lifelong Red Sox fan, is CITGO, which, as you well know, is the famous red sign near Fenway Park.

Nice. That would look good in lights, don't you think?

Early Life

Now that we've outlined the five values, let's move to your life. You spoke earlier about re-entering the past, which is something you seem to do more easily than anyone I know. What's your earliest Jewish memory?

When I was three, I went to a nursery school at our local Conservative shul in South Brookline, where I learned a song that went, "White and blue, white and blue, I'm a Jew and so are you." When I sang it for my mother, she was horrified. She yanked me right out of that school, and later regretted that she had responded too late. She was of German-Jewish descent, and all this white-and-blue stuff was embarrassing. She never liked the religious part of Judaism.

But that wasn't religious.

It was tribal and clannish, which was just as bad. She was part of the Chestnut Hill Garden Club and a big volunteer for the United Fund. She would never have joined a Jewish organization.

But wasn't she active in the Boston Jewish federation?

That came later, when I became interested in Judaism as a teenager. We had a great relationship, but she always teased me about my religious interests — and I enjoyed her kidding. When I was seventeen, I believed in the absolute truth of my new Jewish observance. I thought my parents should keep kosher because I did. I think of that now as my Khomeini period. One summer morning I came downstairs and, as usual, breakfast was on the table. I told my mother I was fasting. She said, “What now? What new Jewish thing have you discovered today?”

“They destroyed the wall around Jerusalem.”

“They did?” This was just two years after the Six Day War, so anything was possible.

“Not today, but on this date, the seventeenth of Tammuz.”

“How long ago?”

“Two thousand years.”

“Well, then,” she said, “get over it!”

Years later, at my father's shivah, my mother told my friend Marcia Riklis, “If you can get Michael to eat lobster, I'll pay you.”

And your father?

He came from a long line of builders of synagogues. They built them, but they didn't go very much.

You come from a large, close family.

I grew up on what was almost a compound — several adjoining houses of relatives on the same street, including my cousin, Laura Geller, who also became a rabbi. We were a huge extended family, in part because my grandfather was one of twelve siblings. My mother had something like fifty first cousins. We would have Hanukkah parties for three hundred people — in a hotel, because nobody's house was big enough. Once, when Laura and I led a family Seder, there were four hundred guests.

And how many of them did you actually know?

I knew them all.

If your mother took you out of a Jewish nursery school, when did you return to a Jewish identity?

When I was eight or nine, my father's father died, and on weekday mornings I went to shul with my dad so he could say Kaddish. Then he'd drive me to school. I didn't know that shul without my father might be boring, because when he was there, it was filled with laughter and his beautiful singing voice.

One morning he was crying, and I asked him why. He said he missed his father. I said, "I miss him, too. Does crying help?"

He said, "During the next prayer, if you close your eyes and listen, and let yourself cry, you can get your grandfather back." And it worked! He appeared right before my eyes, with his warmth and his smile and his accent. I've since had that same experience with the memory of both of my parents, traveling through time in my mind. I've always associated that with religion, as a gift from God.

So your father was talking about the mourner's kaddish?

You would have thought so, but I realized later that he was referring to the repetition of the Amidah.

He said, "During the next prayer, if you close your eyes and listen, and let yourself cry, you can get your grandfather back."

Could you follow the service when you were eight or nine?

Not at all. Back then, it was a bunch of men singing and having a drink, and sometimes there was breakfast. It was community, and I loved it.

And your bar mitzvah?

For me, the service was devoid of all meaning. Because I had dyslexia, I had trouble reading both Hebrew and English, so I had the arduous task of memorizing my Haftarah, syllable by syllable. Fortunately, it was very short. Every year since, I've heard that Haftarah only in syllables, and it wasn't until this past year, at fifty-nine, that I paid attention to the words. The parashah was Ki Teitzei, and when I asked the rabbi what it was about, he said, "It's not an important one." Can you imagine saying that to a kid?

That's sad, and also ironic, because you later made a point of declaring, every time you speak about any parashah, that it's your favorite.

Maybe that's where it comes from, but really, they're all my favorites. My niece's portion was T'tzaveh. Her rabbi told her, "Bo-ring!" She called me

in distress, and I said, “What’s it about?” I knew, but I wanted her to answer. She said it was about the clothing of the priest.

“And what are you interested in?”

“Fashion.”

“In that case,” I said, “it sounds like you’ve got the right parashah.”

So it obviously wasn’t your bar mitzvah that turned things around.

No, but the following summer I went on a trip to Israel, where I had some success with girls, and that helped. But what really made the difference was the amazing Hebrew high school at Congregation Mishkan Tefila, which was headed by Rabbi Lawrence Silberstein. The faculty included such future scholars as Michael Fishbane, Yaron and Sidra Ezrahi, and Eric and Carol Meyers — who became the real-life raiders of the lost ark.

What do you mean?

The Indiana Jones figure was patterned on them. Really, you can look it up! We also had Jeremy Zwelling teaching the Prophets. He took us to McLean Hospital to meet some schizophrenics, so we could compare what they were saying to the words of Ezekiel and Hosea. That was an amazing school, even better than Brookline High, which is one of the country’s great schools. A friend who graduated from both Harvard and Harvard Law School once described our Hebrew high school as the richest intellectual experience of her life. I feel the same way.

Was the Hebrew high school your link to Havurat Shalom?

No. I was very political as a teenager, and one afternoon in the spring of 1968, I went to an anti-war demonstration at the Charlestown Naval Yard, where I met some people from the Havurah. They were wearing talleisim at an anti-war demonstration. This was a Judaism I didn’t recognize, because there had never been a link between my Judaism and my activism. I was sixteen and a half, and Michael Brooks, who later became the Hillel director at the University of Michigan, invited me to the experimental shul he was part of in Cambridge, which had started a few months earlier — Havurat Shalom. I went on Friday evening, and a bearded Hasidic man was sitting on the floor with a long black coat. He was holding a baby and singing a niggun that went on for an hour. Then he made kiddush.

I said to him, “What about the service?”

“That was it,” he said.

“Can you really do that?”

“We’re in charge,” he told me. I didn’t know it at the time, but I had just had my first conversation with Zalman Schachter [who became the founder of the Jewish Renewal movement and is now known as Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi].

When the service was over, Michael and Ruth Brooks invited me to join them and some friends for Shabbat dinner. And what a dinner! There was talk about Hasidism, and about the parashah. I learned that night that the challah, braided in three strands, could be seen as the unification of male and female with God. But it’s the emotion that stayed with me more than the content. This was the kind of conversation I had been waiting for all my life. I had found my home.

And you hadn’t realized what you were missing?

I didn’t think it existed, or was even possible. And of all the religions to fall in love with, I didn’t think it would be Judaism. At the time I was attracted to Hare Krishna.

Weren’t you intimidated by these people?

I was excited to meet them, but nobody knew who they would become. I started going every Shabbos, and I came to know Art Green, Hillel Levine, Barry Holtz, Edward Feld, Joel Rosenberg — all of whom have become scholars and professors — as well as the other members. I was sixteen, and nobody else was under twenty, but they accepted me as a junior fellow traveler. That summer I went on an Outward Bound program, and when I came back in the fall and returned to Havurat Shalom, it was gone! I was bereft. I even wondered if the whole thing was just a dream.

Nobody told you they had bought a house in Somerville?

When I saw Richard Siegel a couple of weeks later at the Hebrew high school, he told me they had moved. In my senior year of high school, instead of going to class, I got permission to go to the Havurah. I spent most of my time studying at the beit midrash a few blocks away, in a house known as Dorton [which is Yiddish for “over there”]. The Dorton guys studied every day, *humash* [Torah] and Rashi.

What was it about the studying at Havurat Shalom that meant so much to you?

The intimacy. As I saw it, the primary purpose of studying together was to learn about each other, so it was a very warm kind of learning. And

there were no papers — just amazing conversations. When I studied Shir HaShirim Rabbah with Everett Gendler, I understood myself a little better.

Another member was Jim Kugel, who went on to become a great Bible scholar. We also studied Gemara and on Saturday nights we drove to the Maimonides school in Brookline to hear a lecture by the Rav [Soloveitchik].

When I joined the Havurah the following September, there wasn't much interest in Soloveichik. The group seemed inclined in the opposite direction — toward Hasidism and mysticism.

I experienced both sides. The davenning was amazing and the studying was terrific. I remember the night a group of us went to hear Heschel speak at Harvard Divinity School. In my senior year of high school, I was more or less living with my girlfriend, who was at Tufts, which was just a short walk from the Havurah.

And when you graduated from high school —

I went to Brandeis, where a number of Havurah members were graduate students, including Buzzy (Michael) Fishbane and Art Green. It was a stellar group, although I didn't know how stellar at the time. Richard Siegel and George Savran were working on *The Jewish Catalog* — this was before the Strassfelds took over for Savran — and you were editing *Response*.

While I was at Brandeis, I had another kind of spiritual experience. I travelled with Zalman to Brooklyn to visit the Lubavitcher Rebbe. I'll never forget it. When I was led into the room, the Rebbe immediately started peppering me with questions, one after the other, about matters that had to do with astronomy, physics, the cosmos. And the funny thing was, I knew the answers because I was studying science, but I couldn't get a word in, and anyway that wasn't the point. Finally the Rebbe stopped asking questions and told me to continue on with my current studies. Afterwards, I sat for a few hours, trembling from that encounter. The force of that meeting has stayed with me all these years.

After Brandeis you went to the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia, which I found surprising.

So did I. I assumed I would end up at the Jewish Theological Seminary. That's where people like me went, people who had grown up in the Conservative movement. But good friends who had been at JTS advised me to make a different choice because the Seminary was so heavily academic. I had trouble writing, and JTS required admission essays. I was interested in the ideas of

Mordecai Kaplan, but the day he spoke at Brandeis, George Savran won ten free games on a pinball machine and we missed half the lecture.

How did RRC work out for you?

I found it painful, because I couldn't do the kind of academic study they wanted. They also held the students in low esteem — correctly, in some cases.

And in yours?

More than one professor told me I wasn't smart enough to be a rabbi. They did not prize humor — or happiness. And it was a more secular place than I expected.

In what way?

I felt that they were against religious observance. I was criticized for being too *frum* — too interested in davenning and too strict in my level of kashrut. I had read enough Kaplan to know that he saw Judaism as an “evolving religious civilization,” but when I got to the rabbinical college it seemed to me that the evolving had stopped with Kaplan. A few years later, people like Art Green and Zalman Schachter gravitated toward the Reconstructionists, so maybe I showed up a little too early.

You also left early.

I left a few months before ordination. I didn't want to write papers to become a rabbi; I wanted to sit in a beit midrash. I later arranged for a private smichah from Reb Zalman. But first I went to Israel and studied for three years at Yeshivat HaMivtar, which is also known as the [Rabbi Chaim] Brovender Yeshiva, and was highly intellectual. I was now divorced and was living with Anny, my girlfriend and future wife, which was, to put it mildly, unusual for a *yeshivah bocher*. I'm embarrassed to say that it made me anxious when my fellow students came to our apartment. It was frowned on to have a girlfriend, although this yeshivah was more interested in learning than in religious policing.

Did the yeshiva give you what the rabbinical college did not?

It was my first Orthodox intellectual experience. We learned all day, *havrusah*-style [with study partners], which was perfect for me because we were teaching each other, which I think is the best way to learn — especially if you're dyslexic. Rabbi Brovender was broad-minded. We were studying the laws about homosexuality, and I said to him, “There are gay guys in our class, so how can they have aliyot?” He said, “How do you know they're gay?” I said, “We all know.” He invoked a phrase about requiring an actual witness. He was

saying, essentially, that they didn't spy on people. He was also a visionary about pluralism and teaching women, and he has paid a price for those positions.

Who selected the learning partners?

Mostly, you were matched up with the person sitting next to you. The feeling seemed to be that if you belonged in that yeshivah, you should be able to study with almost anyone. And it worked for me. I was an honored student there, which had never happened to me before, because the learning was conversation-based, rather than reading- and writing-based.

No wonder you stayed so long.

I also stayed because of Anny. And while I was in Israel, I started visiting Arab villages to learn about Islam and Sufism. Of course that was during a time when an American Jew could walk into an Arab village and be welcomed.

In 1979 I returned to Philadelphia with Anny. I was doing graduate work in religion at Temple University. One day I met a professor of Islamic studies, whose name was listed on the door as S. H. Nasr. I knocked and asked if he had ever heard of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the author of *Science and Civilization in Islam*, which I had been reading. "That's me," he said.

I couldn't believe it: "Here, in Philadelphia? He's a really famous guy."

"Well, as you may have heard," he said, "we had a difficult summer in Iran. I escaped with my life." He became one of my most important teachers, along with Brovender, Zalman, Art Green, Norbert Samuelson, who taught Jewish philosophy at Temple University in Philadelphia, and my *haver* [study partner], Allan Lehmann. I'm still in touch with all of them. But it was at Temple that I was able to understand both Islam, and later on, Judaism, from what I'd call a "religious structuralist" approach, and that had an enormous impact on my thinking.

And then you went to Dartmouth?

At seventeen, I had gone on a skiing trip to New Hampshire, and I wrote in my journal that someday I wanted to be the rabbi at Dartmouth College. When I was twenty-eight, [Rabbi] Dick Israel, a Hillel executive in New England, called and said, "I just spoke to your mother, who said you always wanted to be the rabbi at Dartmouth. The job is open. Are you interested?" I told him I was. "But you'll be isolated," he said. That didn't bother me. I got the job, and Anny and I stayed seven years.

While I was there, I put on a conference for rural Jews in New England. To spread the word, I put up signs in general stores and laundromats around

Vermont and New Hampshire. I expected thirty people, but hundreds showed up. Everett Gendler was the keynote speaker, and he made two big points. First, that Judaism would continue to change from the margins, not the center; and second, that we had to rebalance the natural and the intellectual. Urban Judaism had become too cerebral, he said, and had lost its natural balance.

Isn't that conference still being held every year?

It ran for twenty-five years, and was finally absorbed into Limmud.

Somewhere in here you became involved with the Bronfman Youth Fellowship in Israel.

During my time at Dartmouth, I was involved with the Israel Friendship Camp, which brought American Jewish kids to summer camps in Israel. The camp was supported by Edgar Bronfman, and when he decided to invest in a more substantial program, I designed a seminar in Israel for twenty-five outstanding American high school kids. We had hundreds of applicants, and we accepted some unbelievably talented kids, several of whom became authors, including Jonathan Safran Foer, Dara Horn, and Daniel Handler, who writes under the name of Lemony Snickett.

Were they all day-school kids?

On the contrary. To encourage pluralism, we accepted high-achieving kids from all the denominations, and several with no Jewish background at all. There were students whose families came from Ethiopia, Korea, Iran, Iraq, the Soviet Union, kids from non-Jewish mothers, and kids whose names ranged from Menachem to Megan. We had ultra-Orthodox kids, and kids who had never even heard of Shabbat. They were all on full scholarship.

And how did it work out?

The program is still going strong, and there's a vibrant alumni organization. But it didn't do what I expected, which was to bring the various denominations closer together. Instead, it facilitated the movement toward post-denominationalism and broader creativity.

Because the kids became impatient with the parochialism of the movements they came from?

Exactly. There were Orthodox kids who had never met a Reform Jew, let alone studied with one. But they all knew how to learn, and how to play together. They knew and respected the other kids too much to dismiss the ones who came from different backgrounds. We exposed them to great teachers — both American and prominent Israeli thinkers and writers from all parts of the spectrum.

And in 1988 you went to Columbia — from rural Judaism to the Upper West Side. Quite a contrast!

Unbelievable. During the job interview, Michael Sovern, the president of the university, compared the job of university chaplain to standing between two boulders that were about to collide; the chaplain was supposed to jump in between them at the last moment. That turned out to be an accurate image. My only previous experience with peacemaking was between Reform and Conservative Jews, and now I found myself trying to mediate between the Azerbaijan and Armenian student groups during the war between their two countries. I brought them to my office, and these were graduate student — real adults. They started yelling — in Russian, which of course I couldn't understand. Then somebody picked up a big wooden chair and tossed it through my window. I thought, I could be in over my head here.

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So the president's warning was accurate.

Yes, and dealing with conflict was part of my job. Two days after I arrived, there were press reports that a Columbia football player had assaulted one of the black students on campus. The next day I got a visit from three men I had never heard of, one of whom was Al Sharpton. They told me that unless I turned the freshman orientation over to them, they would shut down the university.

You were a long way from New Hampshire. So what did you do?

I went to the dean. I later came to believe that the alleged assault didn't really happen. This may have been a kind of rehearsal for the Tawana Brawley hoax.

Columbia was never boring. At one point I ran meetings between PLO members and Knesset members. And during the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, I was getting phone calls from China. A lot of the faxes from one side of Beijing to the other went through my office at Earl Hall.

You stayed at Columbia for years.

Most parts of the job were wonderful. Every year there's a religious service, the baccalaureate service, just before graduation. I was told that there shouldn't be any mention of Jesus or other religious figures; they thought it would be offensive. I remember telling the person who said this, "It's not offensive that you believe in Jesus. Killing Jews? *That's* offensive." I wanted this service to be pungent and real, rather than parve and neutral. Muslims like to open a service with the call to prayer, so we started with the call. Christians like to do readings. Jews like to comment, so we read a commentary. Buddhists like meditations, so a Buddhist led that part of the service. A professor read a Taoist chapter in Chinese. A gospel choir sang in English, another sang in Latin, and a third one sang in Hebrew.

And how was it received?

Pretty well. *The New York Times* called it "a sort of paradigm of how to meet the challenge of pluralism on campus." On the other side, William F. Buckley attacked me in the *National Review*. When I was a graduate student at Temple, I hated the fact that most interfaith dialogue was about the things we had in common. If we all shared them, how fascinating could they be? What's interesting are the differences.

There was also AIDS.

That was the hardest part of the job. I was the director of Earl Hall, which was, among other things, the center of the gay community at Columbia, and an important gay center for New York. While I was there I arranged for more than a hundred funerals — I later counted them — including the funerals of people who worked for me. I would organize the speakers, and I would end up doing their funerals, too. It was a searing and heartbreaking experience.

You left Columbia for the Wexner Foundation.

I wanted to teach again. The Wexner retreats provided for three hours of learning a day for five days, so I could cover a lot of ground and teach a comprehensive Jewish narrative. Most people teach Judaism in pieces, and often they have no choice because there's not enough time. Our holidays are the basis for the complex and interesting story of Judaism, and I got to teach what I call our foundational narrative.

What does that mean?

We are part of a long narrative structure of stories, and the master story, as I understand it, is based on three things: creation, revelation, and the

promise of redemption. If these components ring a bell, it's because they were articulated by Franz Rosenzweig in his major work, *The Star of Redemption*. We go through a mini-version of this cycle on Shabbat: On Friday night there's a reference to creation in the kiddush, on Saturday morning we read the Torah and remember revelation, and on Saturday night we have an echo of redemption in the figure of Elijah.

On an annual scale, we have the three festivals: Passover, which commemorates the Exodus, a moment of *national* creation; Shavuot, which celebrates revelation; and Sukkot where we're going toward the land. Passover is about love, which is why we read the Song of Songs. Shavuot is about the giving of the Torah, and we read the Ten Commandments. Sukkot, doesn't have that kind of movement; it's about hoping and yearning. Sukkot celebrates a kind of bitter realism, which is why we read Kohelet.

Tisha B'Av is a different case:
they tried to kill us, they won, let's not eat.

Do you have a formulation for other holidays?

We have three historic holidays: Hanukkah, Purim, and Tisha B'Av. There's a popular joke that the theme of Jewish holidays can be reduced to: "They tried to kill us, we won, let's eat." That applies to Hanukkah and Purim. Tisha B'Av is a different case: they tried to kill us, they won, let's not eat.

Then there are three much newer holidays: Yom HaShoah, which commemorates that fact that they *really* killed us; Yom HaZikaron (Israel's Memorial Day), where we honor those who died fighting back; and Yom HaAtzma'ut (Israel Independence Day). As I see it, Zionism was an audacious assertion of the end of Sukkot: we're finally home.

In much the same way that American holidays like Thanksgiving, Memorial Day, Independence Day, and Labor Day provide an understanding of the American narrative, the Jewish holidays are a wonderful window into the Jewish narrative.

Is it useful to teach about the holidays to people who may not observe them?

I struggle with that question, but I think so. The late Herb Friedman, who founded the Wexner program, decided to focus on Jewish literacy, rather

than Jewish practice, and I think that was the right decision. It didn't matter what you looked like or what you ate. What mattered was what you learned.

Why do you think you're a popular teacher?

I teach with a sense of humor; without humor, people get bored. Nobody wants to be lectured to. A teacher has to engage the students.

You started out at Havurat Shalom and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, which were alternative communities, and eventually you moved to Columbia, and then to Wexner, and finally you landed at UJA-Federation, which are more established and mainstream organizations. Do you feel you've come a long way — not just from your childhood, but from a fairly counter-cultural part of Judaism?

I'm aware of it, but it doesn't feel like a big change. I seem to be able to live in different worlds. I feel comfortable in rural New Hampshire, but I'm also happy to wear a suit. I enjoy crossing boundaries.

Have you been able to keep up your interest in Islam?

I often teach Jews about Islam, and I also go to mosques and teach Judaism to Muslims. They grasp it more easily than Christians do, because we have so much in common. Ramadan has similarities to Yom Kippur, for example, and Hag and Haj are pretty much the same word — for pilgrimage.

Three years ago I was leading Yom Kippur services in Portland, Oregon, at a time when Yom Kippur coincided with Ramadan. I looked up and there, in the balcony, was a man with a long Jalabiya — a white robe, and a red fez. I figured he was a New Age Jew, but during the break he introduced himself as the local imam. I asked him why he was here, and he said he had heard that today was a time when Jews fasted and bowed, and because it was Ramadan, he wanted to experience it.

In the sermon, I spoke about how Yom Kippur is a simulation of death, how we refrain from eating, drinking, working, washing, and the other activities that living people do, while wearing a tallis and a kittel — the clothing of the grave. When the service ended, the imam came to me and said, "I understand Yom Kippur now. It's about death, which is just like Ramadan. But tell me, Rabbi, where is the love in your tradition?"

I told him that on Sukkot, we re-enact the wedding circle while carrying erotic-shaped foliage, which is similar to what Muslims do during the Haj.

"Yes," he said, "some of us carry around palm fronds when we circle

the Kabbah. Tell me, how often do you celebrate the holiday of love after the holiday of death?”

When I replied that we do it every year, he said, “Really? We do it only once in our lives. Not enough love, right?”

I realized later that the Haj is a huge event which has a transformational impact on the participants. When he returned from Mecca, Malcolm X said the Haj convinced him that racism could be cured, because he saw the spirit of unity displayed by Muslims of all races.

I started this part of the conversation by asking about your earliest Jewish memory. What would you like people to say about you when you're gone?

I've always liked a line that is attributed to Menachem Begin, who supposedly said, “I love the Jews I like, and I love the Jews I don't like. I love all the Jews.” That was certainly true of Begin.

And if Begin didn't really say it?

Then you can attribute that line to me.



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