Talking with the Ticktins

Gilah Langner

If you live in Washington, DC and are involved in the Jewish community, sooner or later you're going to know Max and Esther Ticktin. Max is the Associate Director of Judaic Studies and Assistant Professor of Hebrew Language and Literature at George Washington University where he has taught courses in Hebrew language and contemporary Israeli literature for the last 22 years. Esther is a psychotherapist in private practice in Washington, DC.

Max and Esther are the heart and soul of the Fabrangen havurah and have a life-long passion for Jewish education. A generation of alternative Jews have grown up studying with Max, who "specializes" in teaching Yiddish, Hebrew, modern Israeli and American Jewish fiction, theology, poetry, philosophy, Bible, and history. Esther has been a quiet but influential guide and standard bearer for the feminist journeys of Washington area women. And, oh yes, that was Max explaining the intricacies of synagogue baseball in Aviva Kempner's film, "The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg." We spoke at their home in August 2000.

Let's talk about the Fabrangen havurah. I know you have both been devoted members for over 25 years. What keeps you rooted there?

Esther: Fabrangen fits in with everything that I have come to believe in and need. The fact that there is multiple leadership—that no one person is the leader of the community—is essential to me. Fabrangen continues to grow and change as our collective understanding grows and changes. That openness to new experience—both in depth and in diversity—feels right.

Max: Our havurah, and I'm sure similar havurot in Philadelphia, New York, L.A., have an independent existence which is highly participatory and not rabbi-centered. It's so exciting to see people grow all around you, all

the time—this year a person is leading a service or doing a *drash* and I remember when she was this and he was that—my God, it gives such *nachas*, such pleasure, even if they do things their own particular way. There's movement, there's dynamism—and if people leave, so they leave!

Actually, Danny Leifer, *z"l*, Esther, and I founded an egalitarian havurah at the University of Chicago Hillel at the same time as Havurat Shalom and the New York Havurah began, about a year or two before Fabrangen started. We were all responding to the same influences, although we weren't in touch with each other.

Esther: It was called the Upstairs Minyan and it's still going, by the way. In Madison where we lived before Chicago, the only shul near us was a right-wing Conservative synagogue where men and women didn't sit together. It was run by a rabbi who kowtowed to a bunch of ignorant old men who wanted everything the way they were used to in their small town in Russia. The Upstairs Minyan was the first time in my life that I really felt comfortable davening in a group. So the havurah movement seems like something that I and Max and a whole lot of other people invented at the same time out of our own needs and points of development.

Do you think the havurah movement has a bright future?

Max: I'm not so sure I feel that there *is* a havurah movement. I'm not sure that I want there to be a movement as such. We have just come from a weekend in Elat Chayim. I'm glad that the renewal movement is around, but for myself, I am pleased that I'm in a havurah in which there is no rebbe, in which we don't want a rebbe, and in which there are a lot of built-in controls that say there won't be a rebbe!

What's so terrible about having a rebbe—or even a rabbi?

Things become much more curtailed. As far as the *tefillot* [prayers], if there is a central leader, so much turns around his or her stuff. This gets me into a long business about my relationship with Zalman [Schachter-Shalomi, the leader of the Jewish Renewal Movement], whom I saw two weeks ago for the first time in about seven years. So I'm thinking about all the great things I learned from him—I could pick up a *sefer* [sacred book] and tell you specific skills I learned from him, about midrash, about how to read a hasidic text—and also about all the *mishegasim* that I could never stand.

Like what?

Like being a rebbe! He's damn good at it! But even him I couldn't take as a rebbe.

I guess Fabrangen, with its missing "r," is the right place for you! What's the story with the missing "r"?

I suspect that the early Fabrangen members got the word *farbrangen,* which means gathering, from Lubavitch and from Shlomo Carlebach who had made several trips down here. But they didn't know Yiddish, so they spelled it Fabrangen, without the first "r." And then Rob Agus came up with the story that Fabrangen is missing an "r" because we don't have a rabbi. And it stuck.

So that's why newcomers to town are always taken aside and told, Never address Max as Rabbi Ticktin! But rabbi can mean teacher and you certainly have been that. Is this where you wanted to land up?

I really feel extraordinary blessing, gratitude—to *Ribbono shel Olam,* to fate, to people—that I have a second career that centers around adult Jewish education, and the exciting possibilities of being with adults of various kinds, and in which there are so many frontiers. Going to frontiers, identifying frontiers, crossing frontiers, pedagogic challenges—this is what really turns me on, more than anything else.

How did you come to be a professor? You didn't take a conventional academic path.

There's no question that if there had been an option to do a Ph.D. in Judaic Studies when I was younger, I would have done that. At any rate, we were living in Washington in the 1970s while I was working at the national Hillel office. There weren't that many people interested when George Washington University was seeking a permanent appointment for a position teaching Hebrew language. I agreed to help build up the Hebrew language program, but I also wanted to teach what they'd never had, which was literature courses in translation for people who do not have the time or talent to build up language skills. That really turned people on. It was fairly new in American academic life to do that.

What does teaching literature mean to you?

I love presenting Bialik poems or Agnon and Singer stories, and I do it with a lot of enthusiasm. I have to say that the secular, artistic, imaginative work has become, for me, a source for understanding the modern Jew's effort to acquire a life of values. That's a mouthful! But I think that in Israel and America, a number of people are going to become more

intelligent and more affirmative Jews by reading good Holocaust literature, by reading good modern fiction of the kind that A.B. Yehoshua represents, and Saul Bellow, and Philip Roth. Roth's last five books are more Jewish than a lot of people give him credit for.

What drew you to rabbinic studies?

Hershel Matt, *alav ha-shalom*, and I decided that we would try for the [Jewish Theological] Seminary; he was sure, I was not sure. Hershel was my close friend from age 15 to age 65 when he died. We were 19 when we went to New York to see what it was like. This was in 1941. We were convinced that we were going to the Seminary because Mordecai Kaplan was there, and so we began swallowing Reconstructionism like mad. We became "*hasidim*" [followers].

What attracted you to Kaplan's thinking?

I would say that Kaplan struck us as offering a fresh and challenging analysis of the possibilities for the American Jewish community and for American Jewish religion. We were reading *Judaism as a Civilization* with extraordinary enthusiasm, and at that point we were impressed not so much with his criticism of the other denominations but with his original ideas. We sensed that he was looking at the American Jewish community in ways that nobody had ever done before—how to organize the community, how the synagogue and philanthropic organizations could all be bound together. He also echoed our interest in building a democratically run *kehillah* [community government] in New York City, which had been talked about 30 years before by Judah Magnes and which to us sounded like a piece of utopia that might still be reached.

Kaplan's theology was also attractive to us—though I didn't understand how radical it was—because of the whole business of a nonpersonal God, of a naturalistic approach to religion. Where else could we encounter somebody talking about modern Jewish religion and invoking John Dewey and William James? We found it interesting but looking back, I don't think we fully understood it. Later, in the last year or two at the Seminary, Reconstructionism collapsed for Hershel and me concomitantly.

Why did it collapse?

It fell apart under the influence of our wives' thinking, the Holocaust, Reinhold Niebuhr, Will Herberg, and in some measure, [Abraham

Joshua] Heschel. We began to detect within the theological parts of Reconstructionism a kind of American pragmatic optimism, a naive faith in the goodness of human beings—whether or not articulated, it was there. Secondly, strangely enough, both of us began to be much more open toward thinking of a God/human relationship in terms of God as transcendent, even as personal, which Reconstructionism had before not done for us. I used to say, and I still think it's true, that the Reconstructionism of the 1940s and 1950s sociologically and Zionistically made sense and continues to make sense to me 60 years later. The views of the God/human relationship, on the other hand, and the views of prayer made less and less sense.

Increasingly I came to feel—and still do—that the chosenness of the people of Israel is at the heart of Jewish affirmation as I understand it.

Why is that?

I was very definitely influenced, from 1947 on, by an approach to the God/human relationship that we associate with Rosenzweig, Buber, and Heschel, an approach that came to be called covenant theology. It was clearly a critique of Kaplan, and it was also why I had broken with the Kaplanian view that you can have a Judaism that does not speak of the election of Israel. I think Kaplan was reacting to the way chosenness and particularism were viewed in his time. Kaplan had a problem which he solved in his way by saying the Jewish people had chosen *itself* to become a unique people—"chosen itself" being a kind of adaptation of Ahad Ha'am—and leaving out the idea that it's the chosen people *of God*. That formulation seemed increasingly inadequate to me. Increasingly I came to feel—and still do—that the chosenness of the people of Israel is at the heart of Jewish affirmation as I understand it.

Max, you're a traditionalist at heart!

Theologically, yes, I regard myself that way. I definitely cannot undo the brakhot that one says at the Torah for an aliyah. The mystery of the chosenness of the people, as expressed in the *Chumash*, is meaningful to me. I think one can still affirm that the God who created the world is the God of

all humanity, but that there is a subtle blend of particularism and universalism that we have to live with.

What kind of a dent did Mordecai Kaplan make at the Seminary?

There were a few quite loyal Reconstructionists in our day. But most of the people in the Seminary didn't take Kaplan seriously. The people with a yeshiva background, I think, were mocking of him. I would have to say that the Seminary was philosophically, theologically bankrupt in my day, bankrupt in the sense that nobody was really thinking through the big issues, and only with the coming of Wolfe Kelman and Heschel did things begin to change. To put it differently, we were taught to love Jewish books and Jewish literature. We were not taught to think through in any significantly profound way the problems of prayer, the problems of belief in modern times; they just avoided them all.

That's changed now.

Oh yes, it changed in the '50s. It changed because people were hungry for more, and it changed because of Heschel. But when I graduated the Seminary in 1947 it was with the feeling that I was never going to walk through the doors again. It was stupid, because they really didn't hurt me, but I was living out a kind of adolescent slay-the-father business for years.

When you left, did you consider the congregational rabbinate?

I was the only one in my class who did not take a congregational post, and they were furious with me. I loved that, because I was still angry and rebellious. I was not going to give in. I was 25. There was and is some guilt in that they had invested in me to become a congregational rabbi, and I had a free education. The other radicals from that time all became academics.

Esther: Max *never* wanted to be a congregational rabbi, at no point. He felt that being a congregational rabbi was like living in a fishbowl, and that is not what he wanted for himself or our family. I got to know Max's family—his mother, grandmother, uncles and aunts. It was a big extended family, and they were very much involved in Conservative Judaism and in congregations. I remember coming home from shul and the talk was always about the rabbi, the rebbetsin, and their family. Not always in a catty way, but always in a judging way. That was not my idea of how to live.

Where did the slay-the-father sentiment come from, Max? Was your father a rabbi?

My father was a self-educated and really a very bright man. He was not a rabbi. But my parents were divorced and my father does not figure in

my childhood in any positive way. My maternal grandfather was a *rav* [Orthodox rabbi], however, and the most important person in my life growing up. He died when I was 17, when I had just graduated high school, and when I needed him the most. But he knew I was going to university and was very proud of that fact.

What do you remember of him?

He was, at least the way I remember him, singularly non-judgmental—about me and his children and grandchildren. In America where he arrived at age 45, he taught a *hevra mishnayos* [Mishnah class] and a *hevra Shas* [Talmud class] in a shul, and on principle refused to take payment. My zayde did not sit on the bimah or give sermons or play rabbi. He sat in shul and would study, and everyone respected him.

Sounds a lot like you.

He was clearly my model, and that's all the reason why I didn't want to become a rabbi. There was also a negative image of an American rabbi that I had to overcome, partly picked up from the Orthodox shul we went to in Philadelphia which kept changing rabbis all the time, experimenting with all kinds of rabbis.

Were there any positive congregational rabbis around?

The positive image came from Hershel Matt's father, who was an American-trained Conservative rabbi, and a *tzaddik*. Hershel wanted to be a rabbi like his father, and sort of shlepped me along.

What about your mother?

Dedicated, wonderfully loving, never remarried, sick in the last years and died at the age of 60. So that's the tragedy. She never had a fulfilled life. But I should also say that I became extremely close to Esther's parents, though it's 30 years since they're gone. They took the place of parents I didn't have. I loved them, I respected them, every single moment I was with them. My mother died when I was in my mid-30s. Esther's parents survived another 20 years.

My father-in-law was a *lamdan* [teacher], an intelligent, self-taught, sophisticated person, and my mother-in-law could recite Bialik and Tchernikovsky in Hebrew to her dying day. One of my happiest memories is that in the last three years of Esther's mother life, when she more or less lived with us, I kept going to the library to find her German, Yiddish, Hebrew books, which she'd swallow one after the other. It was such a joy.

Esther, speaking of your parents, tell me about your childhood. I know you grew up in Vienna.

Yes, I was born there in 1925. My parents were both immigrants from Galicia. My father had been in the Austro-Hungarian army, and my mother came at the end of World War I. They were 34 and 36 years old when I was born, and they had met and married the year before. Both came from deeply observant Orthodox families, and my mother remained traditional, religious all her life. But Orthodoxy was very different when we were kids—it was not rigid, nor hasidic. Men and women touched each other, boys and girls went out on dates. My father, though, turned away from Orthodoxy and became very much involved in German literature and philosophy. He became essentially a socialist humanist. But when he married my mother, he agreed to two things: making kiddush every Friday night and giving his children a Jewish upbringing. He always used to say he wanted us to *know*, even if we decided to give it up, which in some way he hoped we would. He wanted the formative influence, especially the ethical influence.

Was your family active in the Jewish community?

Some parts of it were important to us: For about two years before Hitler took over, we went every Sunday to the Yiddish theatre. And my brother and I were very involved in a Jewish swimming club, *Ha-Koah*, and the religious Zionist group, *Ha-Shomer Ha-Dati*. My mother went to Friday evening services almost every week, and took us to the Turkish temple in Vienna for Simchat Torah. Zionism, Jewishness, and anti-assimilationism were part of our table conversations with my uncle and aunt. You have to understand that this was Vienna. We were a small minority of anti-assimilationists. We *were* assimilated in that we shared the language and culture, but we were opposed to total assimilation and to not knowing or valuing Jewish heritage.

Did you go to Jewish schools?

From a very early age, my mother took my brother and me to Hebrew school every single afternoon, six days a week. We were quite poor and my mother worked all day, and yet she took off at least two hours every afternoon to walk us there. I have a picture in my mind of a woman walking her two small children over a bridge in the worst snowstorm—that was my mother.

My brother and I have both remarked that we never rebelled against Jewish studies—it was as important to us as to my mother. I taught Hebrew school for 15 years and I never met any American kid who felt that way about afternoon Hebrew education, except Max!

That's remarkable—even more so since your father wasn't really on board, was he?

He would not have made the sacrifices to send us to school. But in his fantasies, when he thought of a daughter, he always thought of a daughter whom he would teach Talmud, who would know Talmud.

Max: That's an important thing in terms of feminism. He was unique in that generation.

Esther: And when we came to the United States as refugees, both my father and mother saw to it that we were accepted in a Hebrew high school that had equal education for boys and girls and in which Talmud was taught.

How did you get to the United States?

We left Vienna in 1939, 14 months after the Anschluss. I was 15.

Do you remember the Anschluss?

Yes. It happened on the same day as the plebiscite—they were pretending to ask the Austrian population to vote for or against Anschluss. My father was burning his personal papers all day. My brother and I were both at the swimming club. As we were walking home, we heard for blocks and blocks behind us the shouting of the enthusiastic Viennese population, screaming Sieg Heil as the Nazis marched into Vienna.

Max: The Nazis marched in on the morning the plebiscite was to be held. This was in March 1938. And the local Nazi outfits were totally ready for them.

Esther: What amazed us was that the next *morning,* in our building and all the neighboring buildings, they all had ready-made Nazi flags flying from their windows.

I also remember Kristallnacht later that year, on November 10th. My father had a retail/wholesale silk and lace store, and that was the end of my parents' business. The janitor told my parents and uncle and aunt that the Nazis had come to look at the store. My parents knew it wasn't safe and they never opened the store for business again. So not only did we feel that our freedom and lives were subject to arbitrary decisions, but now we had no way of making a living.

What do you remember of that day?

I remember the fear all day, watching through a split in the curtain as Jewish men were led to prison camps, and the closing of the Jewish grocery across the street from where we lived. At 5 o'clock in the evening we heard Nazi boots coming up the steps to our apartment. But unlike what we had observed all day from the window, all they did in our apartment was to ask for the men to come forward. They asked some questions, they pulled out two volumes from a bookcase in the hallway—one was by a Jewish writer who wrote in German—and they left. But what we had experienced that day was enough to convince my parents that this was no way to live.

I told them I was willing to follow Jewish observance, but I did not believe in *Torah mi-Sinai*.

We took advantage of the fact that my cousin had been able to get us illegal visas to Belgium. These visas were no longer recognized at the train station, and people were being sent back from Antwerp. Someone had the idea of trying those same visas at the airport, and it worked! That was the first time flying for all of us. We came to Antwerp and since we were illegal aliens there, we were dependent on support from the Jewish community.

Max: Esther came here speaking Flemish, German, and Yiddish. She's gone back to Vienna 4 or 5 times to visit.

Esther: I always want to go back. Max can't quite understand that but it draws me back. I don't try to make sense of it.

Max: I would call it 'cultural patriotism.'

Esther: I just like the place! Anyway, we entered the United States, perfectly legally, six weeks before Hitler marched into Belgium.

So you both ended up in New York City. How did you meet?

Max: We met four years later, in 1944, in a basement in Manhattan, where I was the speaker at a pacifist meeting. What the hell did I talk about?

Esther: Pacifism and Zionism.

Max: I'm not sure I'd want to hear myself say what I said then!

Esther, through her own connections, had met David Dellinger and other conscientious objectors.

Did I hear right—you were pacifists in World War II? Esther, you were a refugee!

Esther: I was not a pacifist but I had met a fellow member of *Ha-Shomer Ha-Dati* who was a pacifist, and we began to correspond. I was feeling very disappointed in the so-called idealism of the religious Zionist movement, how little real concern there was for justice and decency, and how little their idealism translated into their personal lives. I was beginning to feel that "idealism" could easily lead to fanaticism. My friend tried to tell me that what I observed in our movement wasn't true for all idealists, and he told me about some wonderful Christian pacifists, including David Dellinger.

Max: Dellinger was one of a group of students at Union Theological Seminary who at the very beginning of the draft had refused to register, and were sent to prison. They got to Danbury prison and they integrated the federal penitentiary in which blacks and whites had never had anything to do with each other. After a year was over, he still refused to register, and he was sent a second time to prison.

Esther: They were a remarkable group. I got to know the Dellingers and I found them enormously sensitive to other people, with compassion and tolerance, and yet with conviction and dedication to what they believed. That was unbelievably attractive to me. I didn't keep it a secret, though, that I was not a pacifist. Anyway, I would go there almost every weekend to work with them with poor people in the city.

Max: The reason you could do this, we might add, is that you had been thrown out of *Ha-Shomer Ha-Dati* so your weekends were free!

Esther, is this true? You don't strike me as the type to get thrown out of organizations.

My brother and I had rejoined *Ha-Shomer Ha-Dati* when we came to the States. It was very important to me, and helped shape my ideas on social and economic justice, on marriage and child-raising and the kibbutz ideal. At one point the leaders were creating a group that would go to Palestine after the war was over, and form the seeds of a new kibbutz. I wanted very much to go. You had to really commit yourself to becoming a *halutz* [pioneer]. I told them I was willing to follow Jewish observance, but I did not believe in *Torah mi-Sinai*, that is, the divine

authorship of the Torah. They decided not to accept me on the kibbutz, and I left the movement.

So what brought you to a pacifist meeting if you weren't one yourself?

Esther: Through the Dellingers, I met Milton Kramer, who was going to prison for five years as a conscientious objector. I was his only correspondent outside his family and he asked me to interpret his actions to his old-world immigrant parents and other relatives. I figured the best thing would be to take his sister to a Jewish pacifist group. It's not that I wanted to become a pacifist, I just wanted her to understand what was behind her brother's actions. So I went with her to that meeting and that's where I met Max. We had only one date, then I did not hear from him for a whole year.

A year later—I was going to Herzliah, a Jewish Teachers College in New York—we both attended some sort of meeting. I reintroduced myself. He told me at that point that he hadn't been in touch with me because he figured that I was involved with Milton and it was not fair to compete with someone who was in prison.

No kidding!

Max: The Yiddish expression is *"A terutz far di benchlicht"*—an excuse for being pious.

Esther: But that was important at the time, because so many men were in the army and some of the men left behind did take advantage of this.

So, Max, what was the real reason for waiting a year?

I was SCARED!

But Max, let's back up here. What were you *doing being a pacifist in the Second World War?*

It started with the influence of the Quakers in Philadelphia, a high school teacher, and one or two people in the Reform movement who had been pacifists since the '30s. As I look at it now, it's pre-Holocaust. There's no question that once the full impact of the destruction of European Jews and Jewry hit me, hard, in 1946-47, that this was impossible to reconcile.

The threat of Hitler wasn't enough?

Somehow it didn't quite do it. Pacifism was an effort to link up social change and our own values. Until Wolfe Kelman came along, there

were very few at the Seminary who were connected to the outside world. For example, I went to Religion and Labor conventions, where there were Protestant and Catholic seminarians, but not Jews. We really had talked ourselves into the party line, that the use of non-violence is always—"ethically and pragmatically," is the way we used to put it—superior. We read Gandhi and we swore by Gandhi. The Buber-Gandhi correspondence hadn't yet come to my attention. I think that I was living in a mist between 1939 and 1945.

Tell me about the Buber-Gandhi correspondence and how it affected you.

In the '30s, Buber wrote to Gandhi asking for his help in publicly denouncing Nazism and offering moral support for the Jews. In 1938, I think, Gandhi responded to Buber, effectively counseling Jews in Europe to practice organized non-violent opposition—what Gandhi called "soul force"—to Nazism, such as had been undertaken by Gandhi and his followers in opposition to British rule in India. This soul force was conceived by Gandhi as a political weapon. Buber's response was respectful and very moving, but said in effect that Gandhi did not understand state-sponsored totalitarianism in Europe. By implication he was saying that the enemy that Gandhi faced might be persuaded politically by organized non-violent resistance, but in Nazi Germany and other totalitarian settings that meant nothing other than death.

I don't know when I read the correspondence—probably in the late '40s, after the war. But it meant a full recognition of how wrong I had been when I had claimed in earlier years that non-violence was not only morally, but politically, efficaciously superior to violence in *all* conditions. Thereafter I could only say that non-violence is a moral and political force that is proper and potentially effective in selective situations.

But the real disenchantment with pacifism came with contact with Reinhold Niebuhr's philosophy, which was a criticism of this kind of utopian pacifism. Niebuhr introduced a much more realistic and yet morally sensitive approach to political action which he and his follower, Will Herberg, advocated—neither of whom was a pacifist.

You came to know Will Herberg rather well. How did that happen?

Max: Herberg was a Marxist philosopher who was turned on to religion, to the Judeo-Christian tradition, by Niebuhr, and who translated Niebuhr's insights for Jews. He was invited by the Seminary to speak. His talk

was on "From Marxism to Judaism," which was an important article that was then published in Commentary. This was before Commentary became a thoroughly right-wing publication.

Esther: After we heard Herberg at the Seminary, a number of us—including Hershel Matt, Gerson Cohen who became the chancellor of the Seminary, Monford Harris, who is a Jewish philosopher and teacher—became a circle around Will and his wife Anna, and we saw them often, read all his articles, went to his lectures. Mainly we talked—at his house, our houses. It was a real friendship and a big part of our life.

Max: There's no question that here were people in their mid-to-late twenties, who were captivated by him, captivated in a good sense, although we had a very sharp break later when he became a neo-Conservative in the '50s. He was an extremely disciplined thinker, a great conceptualizer, and he had a feeling for American audiences.

Esther: Early on, Herberg was absolutely central in making it possible for us to stay intellectually connected to Judaism. His reinterpretation and understanding of idolatry were tremendously important. The idea that human existence always involves us in sin and that the choices we make—politically and personally—are usually between the lesser of two evils rather than between absolute good and absolute evil. And the need for forgiveness. I can't even think where I would be without this. Heschel has these concepts too, but Heschel is more diffuse and poetic, and not intellectually rigorous in the same way. Both Max and I needed something more intellectual.

What happened after the Seminary?

Max: We went to Israel in 1947-48. It was a dangerous time, and our parents were not pleased about it. But my feeling was that I wanted to see whoever was left after the Holocaust, and increasingly we began to have the image of the two of us as emissaries to the remnants of our two large families. We assembled an address list of people whom we were going to see—and despite the hostilities, we probably made 100 to 120 family visits during the six months we were there. Another reason was that we wanted to study at the Hebrew University and there the name Buber meant more than anything else.

Esther: I had read Buber in Vienna.

Max: He was a culture hero, and we needed culture heroes. We wanted to take any courses we could with him. Certainly no one mentioned Buber at the Seminary. In kibbutz circles he was an extremely popular adult educator—the first person to do informal adult Jewish education. Anyway, it turned out that under pressure from *dati* [religious] circles, Buber had not been allowed to become a professor in Judaic Studies. So he was a professor of Sociology, a one-man department created for him. We signed up for every course that he gave—Sociology of Theatre, Sociology of the Chinese Religion. Two of us walked over to him at one point and asked him whether he would be willing to do a reading course on hasidic texts. He had been in Israel for nine years at that point, and he said that nobody had ever asked him to do this before.

Someone came over to us and whispered, "Do you want to be in the Haganah?"

Was he willing?

He bowled us over by saying yes! But then the fighting broke out and classes were cancelled.

What about the war, and independence? Were you witnesses to that?

Max: We were in Kfar Saba on November 29, 1947 when the U.N. Resolution was passed. The fighting broke out six weeks after we got to Israel. We were living in Jerusalem, but in those first six weeks we were so busy seeing family that we didn't have a chance to visit the Old City, and so I would not see it until 1967.

A week after the U.N. proclamation, someone came over to us—I know exactly where I was standing, on Mount Scopus—and whispered, "Do you want to be in the Haganah?" We said yes, and we discovered that of the other 100 or so Americans studying at Hebrew University, many had already joined.

What were your assignments?

Esther: I was supposed to keep watch on an Arab village from the roof of a teacher's college in Beit HaKerem that overlooked it. It was fairly uneventful except for one day when there was a great deal of activity. It was the funeral of a mukhtar who had been killed, apparently because he was considered a collaborator with the Jews. It was a tremendous funeral. It turned out that the village I was watching was Deir Yassin, where the massacre of Arabs later took place.

But I felt that we had a part in what was happening, because Max went out on *shmirah* [guard duty] every night, and it was the coldest I have ever been in my entire life. Stone floors in our room, no heat, and I was pregnant.

Was food shortage a problem?

Esther: I didn't actually go hungry. But the monotony of what we ate—almost every meal was cans of Heinz macaroni and cheese. I would dream about food—about steaks and roast chicken.

Max: But I don't want any heroism attached to our stay. This was nothing compared to what Jerusalem went through in the second siege. By that point, we had left; Esther was three months pregnant and not well. We left Jerusalem in an armored bus that took seven hours from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv. We got stopped by the British and we had to bribe them with bottles of wine.

So what did you do in the Haganah, Max?

My Haganah experience was more funny than anything else. What were they going to do with us, after all—these untrained, spoiled Americans, *ha-mefunakim ha-eleh.* I had never seen a gun before. So they put us in practice, they had us pull the trigger, they had us crawl under barbed wire, they had us get our hands cut, they decided to teach us discipline, all in three days. So there I was, standing *shmirah* in the coldest January night in Jerusalem, with three pairs of pyjamas on me. Jerusalem was not built up then, and I could actually hear the jackals. The funny thing was that one guy I was standing *shmirah* for, in the middle of the night, called me and said, come in and warm up a little. It turns out he's a professor of entomology who has just come back from spending four years in Central Africa and has a collection of pistols with which he could defend himself a hundred times better than I could. How ridiculous, here I was traipsing back and forth in his back yard, and I'd never even shot a bullet! He should have guarded me!

You came back from Israel, and went into Hillel work.

Max: Madison was a wonderful place. We were there 16 years, from 1948 to 1964. It was a stimulating university with a growing graduate school, an open set of relationships with the younger faculty and graduate students our age. The national Hillel was appreciative, not bossy. Increasingly I got invitations to do things in the summertime with and for the national Hillel.

There was a major "mountaintop experience"—which CAJE, the National Havurah Institute, and Elat Chayim are partially modeled after—namely, we brought together 150 to 200 students for eight days every August at a camp called the National Hillel Summer Institute. The person who founded it was Rabbi Maurice Pekarsky, *z"l*, and he brought me in full-time in 1961. I was supposed to be there the next year, but he died in July 1962. For the next 14 years or so, I was the director. Then National Hillel asked me to be the chair of the staff conference as well.

We left Madison in '64 because we were promised things in Chicago, including that I would be able to have a full-time associate. That turned out to be a person with whom I studied three times a week for the next eight years—Danny Leifer. He came in as a Reconstructionist and I was a right-wing Conservative as far as observance, and in the course of the eight years, we probably switched.

What changed you?

This was a time of increasing problems with Orthodox students at Chicago. It was the beginning of the period in which upper middle class and wealthy Orthodox parents were willing to send their kids out of town to school. That had never happened before. It was also a period in which Orthodoxy was becoming more militant and less defensive in contact with other kinds of Jewish life. In retrospect it was very funny: the Orthodox students who came to Chicago saw that I was older than Danny and had closer to an old-world outlook, and so they began to push me, from the very first week, saying things like, "Are you the *posek* [legal authority] here?" "How come you got grape jam in this kitchen if it's kosher?" and "Where's the *mashgiach*?" A hundred and ninety-one things—they drove me crazy.

It also brought out the worst in me. In retrospect, I'm not proud. I think I was not as quietly tolerant as I could have been toward those to the right of me. Danny did better. I think I was living out my own problems. I was feeling some degree of guilt that I had forced a level of observance on my wife and daughters that was overly rigid. I was also feeling that it didn't make quite as much sense to me as it used to.

And now?

I still feel that you can't have Jewishness without structure, without halakhah. But the way in which that love of structure, adherence to structure, and family observance of structure was undertaken then became

less meaningful to me, became oppressive. For example, I did not travel on Shabbat all the years I was in Madison. I still can't picture myself beginning a vacation on Shabbat, getting on a plane, when you could do it on Friday or Thursday. But to get in the car to drive to shul or even to drive for an afternoon picnic feels very *Shabbosdik.*

The other thing happening at the same time was that I was personally very shaken by how insensitive I had been before on women's rights and obligations in a Jewish setting. I was in spiritual turmoil on that, mostly because I couldn't understand how obtuse I had been until then.

Was there any one thing that changed you?

It was all cumulative, not one single thing.

You were at a Chicago university during a particularly turbulent time on American campuses, and in one of the more radicalized cities. Were you involved politically in the '60s?

Max: All three of our children were deeply affected—and Esther and me—by the things that happened in the '60s, the combination of political action, Vietnam, the civil rights struggle, and concern about the future of Israel.

On one of the marches on Washington at which Martin Luther King spoke, I remember coming in from Chicago and sitting in the Presbyterian church on 14th Street with people who were protesting the Vietnam war. Then we broke up into small groups and talked about how we could support the young men at home and their families. I quickly realized that in my small group, a good half of the people were talking about someone from their church who had been killed in Vietnam. And I'm sitting there thinking, "Oh my God, I come from a community where so few are going to Vietnam or to the heavy fighting in Vietnam." I began asking myself all kinds of questions: What does it mean to be a Jew in the United States if one is anti-war? I had mixed feelings: I was proud of Jews for getting out of it, and at the same time, sad and guilty listening to the black preachers in the group.

The embarrassment and guilt came from living in a part of society—by virtue of being Jewish and the social class we were in—where we were exempt from a lot of the difficulties that were going on. That's one reason why I spent a lot of time counseling young Jewish men who were considering conscientious objection—in some cases with positions close to

mine, in some cases quite different from mine. Some were talking about selective pacifism which was not what the United States law talked about, and would not get them exemptions. Essentially I was listening to what they wanted to do, and if they wanted to formulate a position using Jewish sources to back up their position, I would bring sources to their attention. Whether they could honestly appropriate them for their position was up to them, not me. It was painful to listen to them—because they were always working on two levels: being honest with themselves, and wanting to persuade the draft board. The conflict between the two was considerable.

And did I tell you that I was the only rabbi ever arrested for counseling women considering abortions?

No! Let's hear.

In Chicago I was one of six rabbis and a group of Protestant ministers who were involved through a New York outfit called Clergy Concerned with Problem Pregnancies. At the beginning our only alternatives were to send women who wanted an abortion to Japan, England, and Mexico. When the states began to change their laws, we could send women to California or New York. We also devised a system of sending women from Illinois to a doctor in Michigan. The theory was that two district attorneys would have to be involved, and prosecution would be less likely.

On abortion: I don't think the halakhah helps me, because it does not speak in terms of women having equal rights and obligations.

In December 1970, I offered to cover Christmas week. So on Christmas morning I get a call from a woman, who comes to see me with a man. She identifies herself as being from a small town in Michigan, I meet with each of them privately, discuss the alternatives, and finally give them the name of a doctor in Detroit whom they can go to for the procedure. Then I go off to Israel with a group of rabbis on a UJA mission. And while I'm in Israel, the police raid my house in Chicago. They run through the house, scare the daylights out of Hannah and the other girls, rip out my phone (which probably was tapped), and open my files. Meanwhile, I'm sitting in Jerusalem and Jack Cohen, the

Hillel Director for Hebrew University, calls me and says, "Your wife's on the phone, there's a warrant out for your arrest! You crazy Hillel directors in America, why are you always getting into trouble?"

It turns out they really wanted me in order to catch the doctor in Detroit. The couple who had come to see me were Detroit police officers. So the newspapers picked it up, the students at the University of Chicago began circulating petitions in my defense, Life Magazine did a story, and when I came back from Israel, a former student, Moishe Dworkin, met me at the airport in New York with $2000 in cash in his pocket in case the New York police honored the warrant for my arrest in Chicago. In the end, the doctor was indicted, but the DA wouldn't bring him to trial unless he could get me to testify. On the advice of lawyers, I stayed out of Michigan for the next few years—until *Roe v. Wade* happened.

How do you feel about Jewish views on abortion?

The place to begin is with the halakhah's approach to women. I live in a society in which women have the same obligations and same rights as men—and one of those rights is for an individual woman to determine for herself whether she wants to carry a child to term. At that point, I don't think the halakhah helps me, because it does not speak in terms of women having equal rights and obligations. I would never talk someone into an abortion. It is never an easy decision, but it's not a decision to be made by anybody but a mature woman carrying a child.

You've been married a long time, and you have an extraordinarily close partnership.

Esther: I think we've allowed each other to grow, and encouraged each other's growth and success.

Max: Yes, we've grown together, tremendously. I think in the first 10 years or so of our marriage, the recognition that Esther received from Will Herberg and others of our friends that she was herself a person of intellectual and spiritual openness meant that I didn't start out as the only "professional" in the family. We grew together in that setting. And the crises in our lives brought us closer—the crisis in my career 20 years ago, the crisis of our daughter Hannah's illness, other family issues. Through it all there has been no significant difference in outlook between us.

And when Esther decided in her forties to go back to graduate school in psychology, that was extraordinarily significant because it changed the rhythm in the family, changed the central focus so that it was no longer only on me and my career.

So both of you redefined your careers and yourselves in middle age. Esther, tell me how this happened for you.

I was just thinking about it, because Dick Israel, *z"l*, figured in it, and I just wrote to Sherry about this. I remember Dick giving a talk—he had a way of making you believe in what he said—and saying: "Your parents loved you in a way that you will never love your parents." In other words, parents' love for their children is of an entirely different kind and strength, and the attachment and meaning are much greater.

Idolatry is about worshipping objects or symbols and putting them into the center of our lives—where only God belongs.

I believed him and I believed the pain that statement came out of. I decided, yes, he's absolutely right, that's the way of the world. It made me so angry—not what he said—but because it meant, Who was I? Motherhood was where I had directed my energies and time, and as the girls grew older, that was no longer appropriate. At that point, Hannah was 21, Deborah 18, and Ruthie 15. I decided that something else, other than full-time mothering, had to be at the center of my life. Again, it was Dick Israel who suggested that Max get sensitivity training at the National Training Laboratories in Bethel, Maine, and I went too. It gave me the idea that there was something interesting and important to learn and that led to the decision to study for a doctorate in psychology.

You once gave a sermon that Arthur Waskow has called the best contemporary drash on the Akedah (the Binding of Isaac). The Akedah, you said, deals with the conflict between the two deepest principles of the Torah: parenthood and idolatry. The story is about idolizing children, one's own child, and the Akedah comes to tell us that we must not do so. Were you afraid of that—of investing too much in your children?

Yes—afraid that that had become *the* meaning of my life. Idolatry in the Torah is about worshipping objects or symbols and putting them into the

center of our lives—where only God belongs. This distorts our values and leads us into utter self-absorption where we lose touch with the rest of God's world. I wrote that Abraham had become idolatrously attached to his inner representation of the child and heir for whom he had waited for so long. This son turned out very unlike his father—shy and timid where Abraham was bold and courageous. I imagined that Isaac became an obsession with his father, the focal point of all of Abraham's thoughts and energies, even a substitute for God. God's challenge to Abraham was to rid himself of this idolatry, to see if he could live the rest of his life as if his fantasy creation of a son did not exist—which, incidentally, had the effect of leaving the real Isaac free to grow and develop in his own way.

Death remains a mystery, a challenge to those who survive. You try to pick up the pieces of it.

Drawing the parallels to your own life, I'm wondering if your daughters also broke free or were set free, in a sense. Did your daughters participate in your Jewish life?

Not once they were out of the house. They were into finding their own ways. I remember sitting at a havurah retreat at Weiss' Farm next to Arthur Kurzweil. He was very thoughtful and he said, "I was just thinking how wonderful it would be if my parents were here." And I said, "Funny, I was just thinking how wonderful it would be if my daughters were here."

Of course, we ourselves had gone pretty far from where our families expected us to go. But there was a great deal of sadness and anger, and a feeling of betrayal, in our children's choices. On the other hand, we changed a lot because of our children. I think we grew up through our children.

How so?

We had to think about race, we had to think about intermarriage and what to do with that issue. All three of our daughters married men who were not born Jewish. Hannah who died was married to someone who converted, Deborah in Madison was married—her husband just died recently—to a black man, and Ruthie's first marriage was to a black Hispanic man.

How did you deal with issues of race?

It was a gradual, very gradual process. We had to recognize our

own, totally unconscious racism. In Chicago, we lived in Hyde Park which is the area near the University of Chicago, and it was really an island surrounded by a black ghetto. All of our friends sent their children to the private University of Chicago school system that started in pre-kindergarten and went up to high school, and most of those kids went on to the University of Chicago.

We believed very strongly in public education, not in privileged education, and we also believed in integration. So we sent our kids to Hyde Park High, which had started out an excellent school 20 years earlier. By the time Hannah graduated, the school was about 75 percent black and 25 percent white. By the time Deborah was there, her class of 2,000 kids had only seven white kids. One was Deborah, two were children of a Lutheran minister in Hyde Park, one was Asian, and three were children of liberal faculty members. So that was the integration.

Deborah told us later that she was afraid every morning as she started out for school. One time she came home and looked at her hand and said, My Gosh, I'm all white! So there was all this confusion about race and identity. Hannah had a black boyfriend in high school, and on the night of the prom as they were driving, someone shot at them in the car and into the transom of the house where the party was. But she did not tell us about that until much later.

Would you have done it over again—living where you did and sending your kids to inner city schools?

We did not come out rejecting what we had believed in, but questioning what was fair to one's family and what wasn't. I don't know—I definitely did not want to live in an all-Jewish environment. Consciously we tried to integrate our kids in the Jewish community, but it wasn't much of a Jewish community for our children.

It sounds like a painful rethinking—because you wouldn't want to end up thinking that integration doesn't work, or it leads to assimilation. That would be antithetical to the openness with which you have lived your life.

It *is* painful to think that these things are not enough, that you have to make choices, and the choices have consequences.

I think of you both as realists. You seem to see life as it is, without embellishment or wishful thinking. How did you survive Hannah's death? It seems the worst thing in the world, to lose a child.

Esther: It came as a complete shock. She had a recurrence of the Hodgkin's which she'd had 14 years earlier but we were told it was completely curable. And she was free of cancer when she died of an infection.

Max: Hannah's illness shook us, religiously, spiritually. Death remains a mystery, a challenge to those who survive. You try to pick up the pieces of it. We came out all right—with the right proportion of theological doubts as well as affirmations.

Esther: I think the fact that it was shared, helped. I knew from other people's experience and my own intuition that the death of a child can destroy a marriage and drive people apart. I felt I still had something to live for—and the main thing was really each other, Max and me. That was both a tremendous support and also a motivation to go on. My work helped too. And of course my other children, my grandchildren, and my brother and sister-in-law are very important to me. If I have a choice of whom to spend time with, I will always choose to be with them.

Was Judaism there for you as a help?

Esther: I found that God was there. Judaism is what I am, it's not out there or something I draw in to help me. God was there, though, in the sense that that's whom I am responsible to. I have a wall hanging that says, "Living is what we do with God's time, what we do with God's world." I think the sense that there are still people whom I'm responsible to and for, is really what helped me.

In 1973, Response magazine published an issue called, "The Jewish Woman: An Anthology." In it, Esther, you advocated the acceptance of four new "halakhot" which instructed men and women not to participate in a minyan which separates women behind a mechitzah, and instructed men not to accept an aliyah where women are not called up to the Torah, not to speak about participating in an all-male religious event that one has enjoyed, and not to enter a circle of male dancers which excludes women, whether for Simchat Torah, a wedding, or any other religious or secular occasion—"for you were a stranger in the land of Egypt." "Exclusion is the basic galut experience," you wrote, and you implied that our very Jewishness should stand or fall on our ability to remember that. Do you still agree with your four halakhot? Would you go farther today, or have they been rendered moot?

Esther: I would say that politically they are irrelevant. We now have viable traditional Jewish communities in which men and women are free to function and express themselves equally. As for visiting an Orthodox shul—I see it as similar to a liberated slave joining her still-enslaved relatives in the slave-quarters for a celebration. Of course you don't want to hurt their feelings by not celebrating with them, and if they're happy with their state, who are you to tell them they are debased?

Morally and religiously, I'm still asking the men in my community: how do *you* feel about participating in a wonderful experience that is barred to your wife, daughters, and female friends?

But morally and religiously, I'm still asking the men in my community: how do *you* feel about participating in and benefitting from a wonderful experience that is barred to your wife, daughters, and female friends, or that denies your mother the leadership role that her learning and experience could have qualified her for?

What led you to develop the halakhot?

During our Hillel years, my Jewish soul lived for two occasions: the National Hillel Summer Institute and the Hillel Directors' Conference. Maurice Pekarsky, the great charismatic director of the Hillel Summer Institute who raised several generations of Jewish communal leaders, came up with a principle that made a lot of ethical and pragmatic sense: When there's a conflict among different groups, belief has precedence over taste or convenience. It worked very well for a number of conflict situations; for example, when it came to a question of where to have a conference or retreat, the "religious needs" of the most Orthodox on matters of kashrut or walking distance on Shabbat were given precedence over aesthetic preferences of others. And such is the power of community and the need to belong, that for years I accepted the compromise of my community.

But later, in the 1970s, coming to Hillel Institutes and conferences with the reality of Fabrangen and the havurah movement behind me, this principle no longer made sense to me. Isn't the equality of men

and women under God (or with God) as much a matter of belief—as opposed to mere preference—as the idea that men are commanded to pray but women are not? What's more, isn't the exclusion of women from communal prayer life a sin in our eyes, at least as much as eating non-kosher cheese for the ultra-Orthodox?

In 1973, a number of self-proclaimed "New Jews" from New York called together a sizable group of mostly young, mostly traditional, mostly male Jews who were influenced by the new left, participatory democracy, and anti-war movements of the '60s for a long weekend at Rutgers University to rethink an ideology for American Jews. The list of invitees was curiously short on Jewish feminists. Arthur Waskow and a few other Fabrangen men were invited but no women. Arthur wrote to the convener demanding that he include women, and mentioning three or four Fabrangen women whom he insisted on bringing along.

That's how I got to be at that historic conference. Among other things, it was the beginning of the national havurah movement and the yearly retreats at Weiss' Farm. It was also the beginning of the Israel peace group Breirah, and the beginning of a recognition that Jewish feminism was an integral part of Jewish renewal. People began talking of the need for a new halakhah, and some people actually started a magazine called New Halachah. I don't think it came out more than a couple of times, but that's where my article on the four halakhot first appeared.

I put it in terms of halakhah with tongue in cheek, because I didn't believe in halakhah as understood by Orthodoxy. It was more like a dare: so your Orthodox friends tell you they can't daven with you if there's a woman in sight or within earshot because that's halakhah; so you tell them you have a halakhah too: your halakhah tells you that it's wrong to shame and humiliate a member of your community and make their prayer, their wisdom, their knowledge of lesser value than your own.

How was the women's situation at Fabrangen in the early years?

Esther: Fabrangen was very interesting, totally different from what it is now. In the early years of Fabrangen, we would have these long discussions and there would be women who had been alienated from Judaism because of women's roles in Jewish thought and Jewish life. As we were reading through the Torah, *every* time an idea came up that was anti-women or discriminatory towards women, there would burst forth a

tremendous anger that came out of real experiences—"It was important for my parents that my brother be Bar Mitzvahed, and I had nothing," etc. It wasn't only personal; every time they came across something current, there was an outcry of anger, anger. I did not feel this anger at the tradition or at the role of women. I was disturbed and conflicted when I felt this anger meant dissociation from Judaism, the Jewish tradition.

What was Fabrangen like in the early '70s?

Max: We knew that Fabrangen was different from havurot in New York and Boston because it did not have a hard core of knowledgeable Jews. But it had other things—it was in the center of town, and had a strong tradition of political action. The year before we moved here, they picketed Giant Food—which was owned by Mr. Cohen and Mr. Danzansky—for selling non-kosher grapes. There are people in this town who have still not forgiven Fabrangen for that.

Esther: At the beginning Fabrangen was organized as something to help Jewish kids who had gotten into drugs. When we came in 1972, about a year after Fabrangen started, they didn't even have a *sefer Torah.* But it was clear to us that we wanted to live in the District because it was walking distance from Fabrangen. We made everything else depend on that. We had heard about Fabrangen in Chicago through Arthur Waskow.

Arthur was an important part of your Jewish life in Washington, I gather, and you ultimately helped give him smicha (rabbinic ordination).

Max: Arthur has the most fertile midrashic mind I've ever met in my life. He also has a steel-trap memory for specific events and experiences. He is absolutely amazing in the connections he makes, connections with a purpose. I'll give you one example: I remember in the early years of Fabrangen, Arthur was just getting into things, but learning so quickly. We were sitting in our living room on *Hol Ha-Moed Pesach,* reading Song of Songs, and Arthur immediately said something like: So this was written by a woman, huh? And then began moving into trying to understand what it meant to read it if it was written by a woman, and then to make connections to other parts of the Bible in which women are speaking or women are silent.

And in Washington you got involved with a whole slew of alternative organizations—Breirah for example.

Max: Breirah was founded by people who felt that the 1967 decisions had to be rethought, that a two-state solution had to be found,

that Israel should not be an occupying army, etc. I had encouraged bringing Israeli speakers on those subjects in Chicago and then in Washington. In Washington it was a little more delicate because I was a member of the national Hillel office, and Bnai Brith was under pressure at various times to fire me.

The most dramatic episode happened when four of us, including Arthur Waskow and me, met with two wonderful PLO people at a Quaker meeting house in 1976 or 77 in Washington. This was at the initiative of the Quakers who wanted to have the PLO people meet with sympathetic Jews. One of those PLO people, a medical doctor, was later assassinated by the Palestinians. Unfortunately the meeting, which was supposed to be confidential, was leaked to the Washington Post, which put it on the front page.

Breirah made many mistakes, in terms of leadership, fundraising, in terms of how to win over the American Jewish public to the peace camp, and finally fell apart. But we were doing this *may-ahavat Yisrael*, for the love of Israel.

What else kept you busy?

Max: Well, around the same time as Breirah, six of us tried to start a rabbinical seminary—Art Green, Richie Siegel, Zalman Shachter-Shalomi, Eddie Feld, Meir Fund, and myself. It was to have been a yeshiva without walls. I was influenced by an institution that had just folded in Washington called Intermet, which was a Protestant seminary without walls built on contract learning.

Max, you're the rabbi who didn't want to become a rabbi, and you're starting a seminary?

Yes, because we were training alternative types of rabbis. Wolfe Kelman at the Seminary heard about what we were doing, and sent word saying, I'm behind you. He said—and he was right—that America needs different kinds of rabbis, men and women, serving small congregations, women, congregations that were outside the "mother church," etc. The seminary didn't happen, for many reasons, but I have no regrets about having invested in this project, mostly because, my God! the people who were planning it—such wonderful, stimulating people. We would get together and study, and we learned so much.

Well, if not a seminary, you've been instrumental in many other learning opportunities in Washington over the years.

For the last 14 years, I've committed every other Sunday to a *Chug Ivri* which has a core of 10 wonderful people who want to keep up with their Hebrew. They read very tough stuff, and I have no *rachmonas* on them. But they've helped me more than they will ever realize.

And the Yiddish *leynkraiz* which I lead is now in its 15th year. The mailing list is 40, and the average attendance is 20 to 25—it's an amazing thing!

And the Jewish Study Center.

The Study Center got started, with much credit to Rob Agus, Harold White, and Danny Polish also because of the Intermet seminary. Originally we called it a *lehrhaus*, imitating Rosenzweig. From the beginning, we felt strongly that those who teach would also be sitting in class with others, that no one should be paid, and that new people should be encouraged to teach. We felt strongly we were reaching a population that no one else was reaching. There really isn't anything like the Study Center elsewhere in Washington or in most other cities.

...the seeds for change are implicit in the development of Judaism.

I think all the adult education I'm doing outside the university is, unashamedly, a way of my discovering new frontiers and trying to cross them. The things that I do outside the university complement the university, and the university complements them. When you teach in the academy, you teach critically and not confessionally. At the Jewish Study Center and other such places, I am in touch with what I call advocacy teaching.

You seem to enjoy the variety of teaching experiences.

I do. I've just agreed to be teach Bible at the new Open University here in Washington, which is based on an adult education program called Meah in Boston. If I've learned anything in the last 22 years, it's to figure out who the students are, and to try to find the right level and the right way of making the material stimulating and then involving them.

What are you still searching for, religiously or otherwise?

I'm searching for continuity and change, the name of the old game. Challenges to habit patterns—in Fabrangen that means new participation, new music. As far as Shabbat morning is concerned, not abandoning the basic structure but infusing it with new life. Two kinds of

things I feel very good about at Fabrangen: we continue to have people doing things for the first time, and there are some very gifted original people trying to do new things.

What speaks to you in prayer?

Max: Daily prayer is not meaningful to me now. Shabbat and holiday praying are. For the last 20 years, Esther and I have felt that Shabbat morning is the hub of our week. When we are away on vacation, we try to imitate it in a private way. Without question, that is the rhythm of our week.

Do I have theological doubts, doubts about prayer? Sure I do. But what Heschel says about prayer is something I take seriously: theologically I am committed to the fact that God hears prayers. I'm not praying to myself. I love the language of the prayerbook. I love the Hebrew, I love the sound of it, I love the rhythm of it, I learn a little bit more about the subtleties of the prayerbook every year. I have no objection to translating prayers, but I cannot picture myself at services that are de-Hebraized. One of my problems is that I like to look up *peyrushim* [commentaries] too much. Esther's always telling me I'm getting too much away from the prayer experience and too much into the history of prayer. I love to compare hasidic and Italian and Tunisian prayerbooks, and I sometimes get carried away in that direction.

Do you have any preferences among modern siddurim?

First, I should say that I would like to see us change our siddur every couple of years. All shuls develop their own orthodoxies, sooner or later. It becomes habit, unreflective. I would love to see us develop a loose leaf binder. That's my first preference. I'm not happy that we're davening from a prayerbook [Reconstructionist] that is very denominationally oriented.

In what ways does that bother you?

I think that Arthur Green and some of the people in the Aleph community, perhaps under the influences of neo-hasidism and neo-mysticism, have tilted the description of the God/human relationship more toward an emphasis on God's nearness. My feeling is that the traditional prayerbook retains a balance—a *tense* balance—between viewing God as near and God as far. And I want it that way. I need to see God as parent and as ruler—*Avinu Malkaynu* is a kind of mantra for me! At various times I emphasize one or the other. I love the traditional prayerbook because I think it retains enough openness to both postures.

To my mind, theological thinking can include rigorous philosophical thought, but it is also a response to temperament. A lot of people don't like to say that—they say you're psychologizing. My temperament, as I understand it, welcomes the tension between the distant God and the near God, and between myself as creature and myself as child.

But I don't like to talk about this in a context where it might look like I'm trying to run down other theologies. In our time, it's more important to keep open a variety of options. Obviously some I like better, some I like less.

Esther: The "ongoingness" of Jewish tradition is very important. I believe that the seeds for change are implicit in the development of Judaism, that it's not a break. I prefer to reinterpret than to leave behind. I think the commitment to God is the ongoing germ of development, and everything else—like halakhah and the written-down tradition—is man-made and very much subject to human sinfulness. The need for assertion of power by men in government and in the family have created a lot of what's objectionable in the halakhah. And the really terrifying readiness to destroy all of Canaan, to destroy a people's culture and so on, is part of human sinfulness. But again, there is an opportunity for transcending that, and a germ of transcendence in all of tradition, and that is what I'm connecting up with.

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