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## Two Shuls: A Memoir

*Yehudah Mirsky*

**W**HEN I WAS GROWING UP ON THE WEST SIDE OF MANHATTAN IN THE 1960S AND 70S, MY FAMILY DIVIDED ITS TIME BETWEEN TWO SHULS. ONE, OUR PRIMARY AFFILIATION, WAS A LARGE, BEAUTIFUL Young Israel synagogue; the other, closer to home, a poor *shtiebel* on top of a storefront on Broadway where we went for the lesser purposes of *Kabbalat Shabbat* and *minchah* and *maariv* on *Shabbos*. The West Side was rather a different neighborhood then than it is today. In a kind of scruffy cosmopolitanism, it was full of working, middle and monied class people of every conceivable ethnicity, artists, academics, European emigres playing chess in the cafes, Jews of all persuasions.

When I was small, the ten or so city blocks demarcated by these two shuls marked for me the boundaries of the known world. And the two shuls, in turn, demarcated much of the religious landscape of my childhood. In retrospect it often seems as though the synagogue was where I grew attached to Judaism, while the *shtiebel* was where I fell in love with the *Shekhinah*.

THE YOUNG ISRAEL BUILDING HAD BEEN ERECTED IN 1921 FOR A REFORM congregation of the old school. (A family friend who had gone there on occasion told me the rabbi had once asked him to kindly remove his *yarmulke*, as he was, after all, in a house of worship.) It was all done up in neo-classical style with impossibly high ceilings and immense pillars running

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A glossary of Hebrew and Yiddish terms is included at the end of the article.

along the front wall. The balconies where the women sat ran along the sides and up the back wall, leaving an immensity of space overhead—you had to crane your neck to see the skylight above. That physical space in turn opened a kind of space in the mind, where chants and melodies floated and trailed, leaving you at the bottom of a great expanse which was enclosed, contained, somewhere up above.

I often enjoyed going up to the women's balconies to visit my mother and sister, when I was still young enough to do so. I wouldn't *davven* there, but ferry messages to and from my father and sometimes linger. That space, higher up and closer to the ceiling, was both more intimate and greatly removed from the business at hand. The shul was in some ways a theater, with the divine pageant enacted in the men's section below and the women looking down on their praying sons and husbands, providing for us the touch of the domestic. As the men would pantomime or otherwise wordlessly communicate with their wives there was a kind of hum between the two worlds of worship and home.

The sole remaining vestige of the synagogue's previous incarnation as a Reform temple was the organ, located in the middle of the central balcony, its pipes hidden behind huge latticeworks. The organ lent a touch of comic opera to the place—what the earlier inhabitants of the building had no doubt regarded as a mark of august worship was to us not only useless but kind of silly. My friend Ari and I would sometimes climb up behind the latticework through a trap door in an upstairs corridor and lounge about in the great pipes.

It was that kind of great old building, with hidden rooms and dusty back corridors, whose mustiness suggested a more immediate past than the one declaimed in the liturgy and the Torah readings, namely the New York of the nineteen twenties and thirties. Rummaging around you would find old rotary fans, coffee pots, newspapers. I'd always felt a profound longing for that time, probably because it was during those decades that my parents themselves were children, and having it so near at hand gave shul-going a sense of stepping back in time; and a kind of magic. The unused rooms and floors of the large building offered venues for rambling, talking, exploring, playing all over. There was a gym and a social hall and classrooms and a small *beis midrash*, and each sort of room became its own facet of shul-

going. Sometimes the younger people would *davven* in the *beis midrash* and then run around. Ari and I would sometimes go for a walk to the florist on the corner and have fun trying to read the foreign language papers at the newsstand. As we got a little older we would hole up in an unused classroom and sit in great waves of sunlight, jackets off and neckties loosened, and talk, and look out across the rooftops.

The service itself had Orthodoxy's peculiar mix of seriousness and informality. Of course we sat and talked during *davvening* and walked around and in and out. The room was large enough to afford groups of families their own neighborhoods—in one corner were talkative East Europeans, in another Western Europeans of a sterner cast. We sat with good friends in one of the shul's more American "neighborhoods."

One regular always sat alone. His name was Hans. He was a Holocaust survivor who would often break into seizures during services, gesticulating wildly, shaking his fist at the ceiling and shouting incomprehensibly, stuffing a handkerchief into his mouth to calm himself down. Rumor had it that he had witnessed his entire family's execution. Clearly he had seen unspeakable things, lost to the rest of us in his tortured, raving shouts. He was almost never turned out or away.

There was no cantor, though one very pious and learned man with a sweet voice served as the semi-official *baal tefillah*. The beauty of his *davvening* was that it came from the heart—my brother pointed out to me a little while ago that we never even knew what he did for a living, and yet he was far and away the most revered person in the shul. On Yom Kippur he was in his glory. The day would begin with the solemnities of Kol Nidre, whose real sanctity, I think, was in the marking of time. At those moments of beginning, one couldn't help but look around and see who was there and who was not, who had died, who had married, who had moved and who had returned. That moment of Kol Nidre was the fixed point from which one could look out and register the ravages and blessings of change.

There were public moments with a kind of epic grandeur—the sheer drama of taking the Torah out of the ark; falling to one's knees on Yom Kippur, or during the *Amidah*, watching the ripples of bodies under the *talleisim*, the undulating motion sweeping through the vast room in dozens of directions; dancing on Simchat Torah with Sephardic Torahs in their

magnificent gilded cases. And there were private moments, or the cumulative private moment, accrued over years, of my brother and I davvening with my father, being endlessly and uselessly told to stop poking at and generally bothering each other, nestling under his *tallis* during *birkat cohanim*.

The totality of it all—the sheer weight of the building, the ceremony of the services, the socializing afterwards, the play throughout and in the afternoons, gave it all a kind of heft. God of course was there, but less as a divinity and more as a kind of web holding it all together.

I am, of course, tempted to say that my sister felt woefully excluded, as did a number of my female friends, but she tells me that's not so. She traces her years at the Young Israel by her position in the balcony. When she and her friends were kids they would hang over the railings. Then they moved way up to the back of the balcony where they could talk and survey it all. With maturity, she says, they found regular places to davven. She recollects that being too old to sit with my father in the men's section was a milestone towards adulthood, like the first time you fasted all the way through Yom Kippur.

My father was a rabbi and professor and part of the Modern Orthodox aristocracy. This gave us a certain cachet and, in the social pecking order of the shul, made up for the fact that we did not have much money. And indeed the shul itself aspired to some kind of egalitarianism, as it was part of the Young Israel movement. Today the designation Young Israel on a synagogue is largely inconsequential, but then it still retained some of the flavor of the distinctively American movement it had been at its founding on the eve of World War I, a self-consciously Modern Orthodoxy where nobody payed for *aliyot*, where the laypeople gave classes (the first Young Israel congregations, before the war, didn't even have rabbis). It was a movement that welcomed women and gave them leadership positions, where women could sing along during the service and participate in the non-liturgical life of the synagogue.

The rabbi of our Young Israel was a sad fit—a prodigious *talmid chakham* from a “black hat” yeshiva who never reconciled himself to being the rabbi of a congregation, he was exquisitely out of touch with his congregants. His classes were marvelous but his sermons were excruciating; he saw his role as leading a life of exemplary piety, with the expectation that

his congregants would follow, if they cared. They, out of respect for his learning, generally refrained from criticizing him. Instead they drifted away one by one as over the years he steadily ran the shul into the ground, at first unthinkingly and later with a kind of perverse wilfulness.

My own drifting away had much less to do with him, and more with the ferocious turns of my adolescent spirit. While I still kept going to the Young Israel, our other shul, the one we didn't go to for the services and affiliation that “mattered,” became my sanctuary.

TO GET TO THE SHTIEBEL YOU WOULD WALK UP A NARROW FLIGHT OF STAIRS, at the bottom of which a bitter Holocaust survivor named Morris sold newspapers. After Shabbos, my father would get an evening paper from him, for which he'd pay later in the week. Whether or not he'd paid, Morris would tell me and my brother during the week that he hadn't and get us to pay for the same newspaper two or three times.

On entering the shtiebel, the women's section was off to the left, bounded by partitions at the front and along one side. The benches were old with nail heads sticking up through a succession of paint jobs. The walls were painted white, and there was a ramshackle bookcase up front. Wherever my father went he gravitated towards the back, and so we sat in the back row up against the partition of the women's section alongside a window looking out onto Broadway.

The *aron kodesh* was made of imitation wood, with a velvet cover. The men, nearly all survivors, were mainly clean-shaven, spoke Yiddish, and were small-time businessmen—one owned a soda bottling plant, others were accountants or had a store—with the occasional landlord at the top of the income scale. They no doubt had their grievances and intrigues—a shul, no matter how pious, is still a shul—but there was a kind of simplicity about them and the place, and they were largely devoid of the posturing and self-righteousness that one found among the denizens of most of the other *shtieblach* in the neighborhood. At the center of everything was the rabbi.

His name was Moshe Halevi Steinberg. He was immensely learned, with a phenomenal reputation for sheer erudition, particularly in the realm of responsa, the many volumes of Rabbinic opinions that make up

the lived reality of *halakhah*. He had a striking bearing, an immaculately kept beard that ran six inches below his chin and clear gray eyes. He was a Hasid, though so far as I could tell of no school in particular. He never held himself out as a *rebbe*, which, my brother once pointed out, made the sheer force of his personality that much more compelling.

He was from Brody in Poland, where he had been the *av bet din*, the head of the Rabbinical court. The official name of the shul was *Machzeh Avraham*, Abraham's Vision, the title (taken from Genesis 15:1) of the responsa collection of the Rabbi's grandfather, Abraham Steinberg, his predecessor in the Rabbinical seat in Brody. The shul and the Rabbi quite literally owed their existence to a vision of Abraham. Rabbi Steinberg said that as the Germans approached Brody he had been hesitant to leave until one night his grandfather appeared to him in a dream and told him to go. He did, and the next day the Germans arrived. I believe he spent the war in hiding. One heard in whispers that the malnutrition his wife suffered during the war was the cause of their childlessness.

As I said, we always went to the shtiebel for minchah and maariv on Shabbos. Though my mother's family was Hasidic, my father was a *misnagged*, literally an anti-Hasid, put somewhat differently and I think a bit more accurately, one who preferred study to rapture. Because my father was a *misnagged*, we didn't eat *seudah shlishis*, the third Shabbos meal favored by Hasidim. Instead, we would sit and learn *gemara* in the twilight, to the accompaniment of the *zmiros* of the old Hasidic men eating *seudah shlishis* in the women's section. The women were absent. My mother would sit by the window and wait for us to come home from shul.

Unlike many *misnaggedim*, my father was an infinitely gentle soul, and looked on the down-at-the-heels Hasidism of the shtiebel with a kind of bemused affection. And he deeply respected the Rabbi's erudition and quiet spirituality.

The more I learned, the more I too was awed by Rabbi Steinberg's erudition. I was, in my adolescence, quite the little *misnagged* myself, and simply could not understand how Rabbi Steinberg, in good Hasidic fashion, played fast and loose with the halakhically-mandated times for prayer, or let *seudah shlishis* begin perilously close to sunset. At times he would sense my agitation, and assure me with a chuckle that everything was fine.

My halakhic agitation was, at that time, of my essence. As I entered my teens, sex and death hit me like a freight train. The arousal of my body came when I was twelve, during the springtime. The familiar park on Riverside Drive that I had known all my life suddenly set me wild with pleasure and longing, the trees and sunlight and smells of wet earth transporting me nearly out of my senses, loosing energies that knew no bounds, delightful and harrowing in equal measure. Death came home with the loss of my aunt Rachel, a sweet and tragic woman, at forty-eight, not long after my bar mitzvah. All of my grandparents had died by my seventh birthday, and the knowledge of absence had long hung in the air, a mist clouding the joking and homework and Shabbos meals of our home. My aunt's death somehow crystallized the sense of loss that had long rested beneath the surface, shattered every certainty and placed heartbreak at the center.

*Olam ha-zeh*, this world, had somehow turned against me, and my chief assailant was my body; it drove me to unquenchable desire and one day would kill me. There was, it seemed, no way out, but one—Torah. A life of learning and *mitzvot* promised a way out of death, a union of spirit and action; if I learned enough Talmud, mastered enough texts, did enough *mitzvot*, davvened with enough *kavanah*, maybe I would find transformation and connection and peace. Of course, I never did. All the learning, which was never enough, and all the davvening, with never enough *kavanah*, could not ease the burning inadequacy I felt over the queer habitation of my soul in my body, of my self in my self.

Elul, the penitential month preceding the High Holidays, was of course the cruelest, when my failings were heaped up before me and all I could hope for was pity. During Elul, I would get up early and go to the shtiebel for *Selichos*. I got so used to getting up in the darkness that one morning I was dressed and nearly out the door before realizing that it was two a.m.

In those years I tried to go to shul as often as I could and rarely davvened at home. At the Young Israel, I knew I was doing my bit, fulfilling my obligations, keeping the faith. In the *beis midrash* at yeshiva I was comforted by the books and the aura of learning—however imperfectly my own study was going—and by the camaraderie of it all. Still I was dissatisfied everywhere, and the shtiebel was no exception. But there, saying *Selichos* in the semi-darkness of the morning, I felt close to some beating heart, some

presence that vibrated with my own pain and longing, something close, breathing gently over me.

One morning after davvening, as we were wrapping up our *tefillin*, I asked Rabbi Steinberg a question about a Talmudic passage I had been studying. He said he recalled that my problem had been discussed by one of the 19th century commentators, Zvi Hirsh Chajes, whose glosses are reprinted in the back of the standard editions. We looked it up, and indeed, Chajes had discussed that very question. Smiling a little, he said to me: "You know, the last time I saw this line in Chajes was before the war." I was dumbstruck by his easy recall of this one obscure footnote to the mind-boggling vastness of learning; since the last time he had read it the universe had been ripped apart, his entire civilization had been slaughtered, and still he remembered it, and it gave him pleasure.

Communication between us was not great, as his English was not the best and my Yiddish was painfully thin. Even so, I went to his two major *drashot* of the year, on *Shabbos Shuva* (in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur) and *Shabbos Hagadol* (before Passover) and listen as best I could. As he was widely acknowledged as the greatest *talmid chakham* on the West Side, nearly all the shtiebel-goers in the neighborhood would come, and extra benches had to be set out. I remember one *drasha* in particular, the last I ever heard from him. As customary, he began with an hour or so of *pilpul*, of dialectical back and forth on some aspect of the laws of Passover, starting with an ambiguity in the Talmudic text and associatively moving into a thicket of halakhic issues, asking and answering and asking questions, working his way through citations to medieval and later Talmudists en route to some resolution.

When he was done with his *pilpul*, Rabbi Steinberg shut his books, smiled and said: "Enough with the Lithuanian scholastics (*Litvishe lomdus*), now for some *Hasidische Toyrah*." And then he gave a homily on the meaning of Passover, on slavery and freedom and the way out of Egypt. At one point he began, "I once heard a thought (a *vort*, literally, a word) from Rabbi Aharon of Karlin." He stopped, and looked off into the middle distance, into some vanished place, his face a shade of love and awe and sorrow. "Ach, Rabbi Aharon of Karlin, a holy Jew, a *heilige yid*." I was somehow captured by that moment; years later I came to understand that it was then that I first

sensed that neither I nor any of my contemporaries would ever be a *heilige yid*, not that kind of *heilige yid*. With luck and work and mercy, we could learn to be some kind, maybe, but it would have to be another.

Shortly thereafter I left for Israel, and shortly after that the shtiebel fell early victim to the Manhattan real estate boom, when the new landlord (for the record, a member of the tribe) jacked up the rent. I got the news in a letter that arrived at my yeshiva on a Friday afternoon. That night, at *Kabbalat Shabbat*, looking out at the magnificent purple sunset, I could feel all that that shtiebel had been, that innocence, that simplicity, that intimacy, running like water through my hands, and I threw my head back and cried.

Rabbi Steinberg and some of the men started davvening in a different shtiebel a few blocks away. My father had never cared much for the people there, and the place had the feel of exile, so we started taking our Friday nights and Shabbos afternoons at an even smaller shul in the *gemutlich* sitting room of a widowed rebbetzin nearby.

Unlike most of my peers, I had moved away from doctrinal Orthodoxy during my years in Israel. I experienced deep disillusionments with the world of the *beis midrash* and the doctrines of Orthodoxy, discovered historicism and experienced violence, and painfully learned that I could only salvage my spiritual life by turning inward, away from the pursuit of fixities and towards some kind of spiritual language that would draw not only on halakhah but on Jewish literature, and non-Jewish ideas and art and politics and simple human kindness. But that is another story. Suffice it to say that by the time of my return to the States, in the early 80s, the Young Israel was largely a dead letter for me, and the only real reason to go there was to be with my father. If the Young Israel's vastness no longer felt like home, it was still deeply familiar, and that space surrounds me still.

After my father died, when I was twenty-one, my brother and I would sometimes go to visit Rabbi Steinberg at his new place, and we would walk him home, as he stopped to make small talk with the street people on the way. Once, as we walked past a line of broken men standing outside a liquor store on Broadway he turned to us and said there was so much more he wished he could do. Yet there was a kind of jocularity about him in those years, a lightness, or maybe we were just getting older and so he allowed himself more familiarity with us. He died a few years ago, shortly after publishing his own



major work, *P'nei Moshe* (literally, Moshe's Face, after Exodus 34:35—"And the Israelites saw Moshe's face for Moshe's face was shining").

Over the years when I would visit New York and walk along Broadway, I would glance up at the windows and note the restaurants and clubs that regularly opened and closed at the top of the stairs. Once, late on a Saturday night a couple of years ago, I walked up to take a look. The basic layout was the same but now there was a jazz club there, with pictures of musicians and even a couple of drag queens on the walls, a bandstand where the *aron kodesh* had been. It was last call and the waiters were upending the chairs. I just stood there in the middle of the floor and the maitre d' asked me what I wanted. I told him there had once been a synagogue in that room and he said, yeah, somebody had told him that and could I get moving so they could close up. As I walked out, I remembered how, when Rabbi Steinberg would leave the shtiebel, rather than reach up to the mezuzah, he would simply lay his hand on the doorpost and then raise his fingertips to his lips. I headed down the narrow flight of stairs and out into the familiar night.



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## Glossary

- Aliyot** Literally, "ascents." Being called up to the Torah; in traditional synagogues this would often be accompanied by the public announcement of a gift to charity or the synagogue.
- Amidah** The standing, silent prayer that is the heart of each Jewish prayer service.
- Aron kodesh** Literally, "holy ark." The ark in which Torah scrolls are kept.
- Baal tefillah** Literally, "prayer leader" or "master of prayer," a cross between a cantor and a layperson. On the impossibility of adequately translating this particular phrase, see Cynthia Ozick's essay, "A Translator's Monologue" in her collection, *Metaphor and Memory*.
- Beis midrash** Literally, "house of study." A library and reading room in which people study texts aloud, alone or groups.
- Birkat cohanim** The priestly blessing. According to tradition the divine presence alights on the outstretched fingertips of the priests; it is customary to avert one's eyes and place the tallit over one's head.
- Davven** Yiddish for "pray."
- Drasha** Sermon, public lecture. Plural: **drashot**.
- Gemara** Aramaic name for the Talmud.
- Halakhah** Literally, "way" or "path." The corpus of traditional Jewish law, elaborated in the Talmud and ever since.
- Hasid** Literally, "pietist." Adherent of the wing of Orthodoxy, founded in the 18th century, that augments halakhic scholarship and observance with a special emphasis on interiority and spirituality, greatly influenced by the mystical tradition.
- Hasidische Toyrah** "Hasidic Torah," in Polish Yiddish dialect.
- Kabbalat Shabbat** The service welcoming the Sabbath on Friday night.
- Kavanah** Traditional term for the focused attention accompanying religious acts.
- Litvishe lomdus** Lithuania, and particularly Vilnius (Vilan, in Yiddish), was regarded as the seat of Jewish intellectualism and the great *misnagged* stronghold.
- Minchah, maariv** Afternoon and evening services, respectively.
- Mitzvot** Literally, "commandments." The precepts and provisions of Jewish law.
- Rebbe** A dynastic, charismatic Hasidic rabbi.
- Selichos** Penitential poems recited during the month of Elul.
- Shabbos** Sabbath, in traditional Ashkenazic pronunciation.
- Shekhinah** The divine presence; in the mystical tradition, the loving, feminine dimension of God.
- Shtiebel** (Yiddish) literally, "little room." A small, not especially formal, usually Hasidic, synagogue. Plural: **shtieblach**.
- Tallis** Prayer shawl. Plural in Yiddish: **talleisim**.
- Talmid chakham** Literally, "wise pupil." The traditional designation for a scholar.
- Tefillin** Phylacteries. Prayer boxes worn on the forehead and arm during certain morning services.
- Zmiros** Medieval poems set to music and sung at the Sabbath table.