

## A Conversation with Arthur Green

William Novak

**I**CAME TO KNOW ART GREEN IN THE FALL OF 1970, WHEN I MOVED FROM NEW YORK TO BOSTON TO BECOME A MEMBER OF HAVURAT SHALOM COMMUNITY—A GROUP HE HAD FOUNDED TWO YEARS earlier as an alternative seminary, and which already had been through several changes. In 1973, Art and his wife Kathy moved to Philadelphia, where Art taught Jewish thought at the University of Pennsylvania, and where he published his acclaimed work, *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav*. (The book, originally published in 1979 by the University of Alabama Press, was reprinted in 1992 by Jewish Lights Publishing.) Among Green's other books is *Seek My Face, Speak My Name: A Contemporary Jewish Theology*, published in 1992 by Jason Aronson.

In 1986, to the surprise of most of those who knew him, Green was named president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. We picked up our friendship in the fall of 1994, when Art and Kathy returned to the Boston area, where Green is the Lown Professor of Jewish Thought at Brandeis University, and where their daughter Hannah Leah is an undergraduate. What follows is an edited transcript of two discussions at Green's home in Newton, Massachusetts, in November 1994.

*One of the few things I know about your childhood is that you grew up in Newark. Did you attend Weequahic, the high school Philip Roth described in Portnoy's Complaint, where the student body was 95% Jewish and the football team was a joke?*

I had always looked forward to attending Weequahic because there were so many Jewish (and bright and intellectual) kids, but I ended up going

there for only one year. My dad taught history and social studies at Weequahic, and Roth had been one of his students. My older sister knew the family that was later portrayed in *Goodbye, Columbus*.

*Today's Newark is not exactly a thriving place Jewishly, but I gather that wasn't true in the 1940s and 50s.*

Newark was a city of half a million people, including a hundred thousand Jews. We lived in a white, working-class part of town known as Clinton Hill, which had a real ethnic mix of people—Ukrainian, Italian, German, and maybe 15% Jews. It was a colorful, ethnic neighborhood, and I loved it. I felt secure in that world, and I was fascinated by the ethnicity and ethnic variety. As far as I knew, there were three major religious groups: Catholics, Ukrainian Orthodox, and Jews, and you could tell them apart because the Catholic kids beat up the Jews. Our synagogue was right across the street from Blessed Sacrament, and after Hebrew school you had to watch out for the kids coming out of catechism. I was beaten up a few times, although I don't know for sure whether that was because I was Jewish, or because I couldn't defend myself.

*So you were in an urban environment.*

Yes, and we were out of place in that neighborhood because my parents were intellectuals, and most of the other people were factory workers. I lived with my parents and my sister in a two-family house. Upstairs was an older Ukrainian woman who still lived in an East European milieu, and I fell in love with her world. Mrs. Chomiak was like a grandmother to me, and I used to go up there and sit for hours in her kitchen, listening to her and her friends speaking Ukrainian around the coal stove. I'd be there first thing in the morning, and again right after school, and over time I learned dozens of Ukrainian words and phrases. She would feed me pirogen and kielbasi, which my parents didn't appreciate because I already had an eating problem. I was overweight, non-athletic, and bookish, which didn't exactly make me popular with the other boys at school.

*Your father was a teacher. Did your mother work, too?*

She taught elementary school, but she became seriously ill when I was seven, and she died of cancer when I was eleven. My sister and I were not told how sick she was until a week before she died. People didn't use the "C" word in those days—and especially not with kids.

My father and my stepmother died last year, but my sister is alive and well. She's a committed Buddhist, and a leader of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. She lives in Western Massachusetts.

*So you and your sister ended up with remarkably similar interests.*

In a way, it's the "punishment" of our father, who was a strongly, avidly committed atheist. He believed that religion was absolute nonsense, and worse, *poisonous* nonsense. He *hated* religion. The only thing Dad ever published, which we found after his death, was an article in the 1930s for the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism. But he never joined that organization because he believed that, in its own way, it too was a religion. My bar mitzvah was the only time in his adult life that Dad was inside a synagogue. He wore his hat during the service because he refused to put on a yarmulke, which he considered a religious symbol, but by wearing the hat he ended up looking quite *frum* [religious].

*What were your father's Jewish roots?*

His parents were secularists who came to New York from Lodz around 1906, a year before he was born. Both sets of my father's grandparents came to America later, after World War I. They were Hasidim.

*Given the depth of his hostility to Judaism, and the fact that your mother was no longer alive, I'm surprised you even had a bar mitzvah.*

Mom had been very tied to her parents, who were traditional, more or less right-wing Conservative Jews, and my father's great conflict in life was with his in-laws. They were East-European Jews shtetl Jews who ended up in America. Grandpa's tailor shop had been open on Shabbos for sixty years, but that was business, and there was no choice. Grandma wouldn't write or sew on Shabbos. If I didn't have a bar mitzvah, they would have been scandalized. They lived in Paterson, about twenty miles away.

*Where Allen Ginsberg grew up.*

That's right. In fact, Ginsberg's father and Dad taught together at one point.

*So your father sent you to Hebrew school, but reluctantly?*

Every year he would make a speech about it: "You know, you can always quit if you don't like it." And every year I liked it.

*So there was at least one kid in twentieth-century America who actually enjoyed Hebrew school.*

It's a rare thing, but Temple B'nai Abraham was a progressive place. Joachim Prinz was the rabbi. They used the Sephardi pronunciation and taught real spoken Hebrew. Because Prinz was neither Reform nor Conservative, they were unaffiliated with any denomination. It was a German liberal

synagogue, and many of the Jewish intellectuals in Newark used to attend because Prinz could really speak. Years later, I saw B'nai Abraham as a place where the choir consisted of non-Jewish, professional singers, and the congregation didn't even open the book. But at the time, I loved it. It was a Reform service, but with more Hebrew.

*You were born in 1941, so you probably have some memories of the creation of Israel when you were seven.*

I remember that people were debating whether the new country should be called Judea or Israel. Dad thought it should be called Palestine, which tells you where he stood. He wasn't a Zionist at that point, although he later became one. He was a secularist, like his parents. But even Jewish secularists knew tradition, in those days. When I got in her way in the kitchen, my paternal grandmother used to say, *gay shluggen kapores* [go fling a chicken, as in the pre-Yom Kippur ritual], by which she meant, Get out of here!

*Did she mean it as an anti-religious remark?*

Not at all. No, even in her secularism, her imagery was thoroughly imbued with tradition. It's probably the same phrase *her* mother had used when she was young. When I was in college, this same grandmother wrote me a letter that consisted of one long sentence written in night-school English. "Dear Arthur," she wrote. "I hear you still want to be a rabbi, but I would be prouder of you if you would be a teacher and teach people things that are true, because if there was a God in the sky he would have been shot down by Sputnik already."

*I love that "already."*

That letter was her final attempt to convince me that religion was nonsense. She and her husband lived in California. When there was a wedding, my father's aunts and uncles (who were Communist Party members) stood outside until the ceremony was over because they didn't want to be present for a religious event. Today they're all scattered and gone, and I'm nearly the last Jew in my father's family.

*How did your life change when your mother died?*

My maternal grandmother was devastated. Mom had been, at least in retrospect, the favorite of Grandma's four children, and I can still hear my grandmother's screams at her funeral. I was the one who replaced the loss. Although I didn't move in with my grandparents, I started going there on

weekends and on Jewish holidays, and they strongly encouraged my Jewish involvement. Then, two years after my mother died, their only son died suddenly of a heart attack, and I became the gift the family gave to my grandparents to heal them. We gave each other a lot.

*So between your grandmother and Mrs. Chomiak upstairs . . .*

From early childhood on, I got along far better with older people than with my peers. There were kids I played with, but until I was in college I didn't know what a friend was.

*Did you have any kind of friendship with your father?*

The one thing we did together was collect stamps. We used to sit together for hours, making our own albums. We specialized in Central and Eastern Europe, because his roots were there. He used stamps to teach me history and geography, and I still have thirteen albums of stamps from around the world.

*So Judaism was an early interest, partly an attraction to your European roots, but it really took off after your mother's death.*

Yes. After my mother died I started to become religious. The year of my bar mitzvah I had a Hebrew teacher named Aryeh Rohn . . .

*You're kidding! When I started going to Camp Ramah in the early 1960s, he was the educational director.*

Aryeh Rohn is responsible for my entire Jewish life. He lived in Brooklyn and used to moonlight as a Hebrew teacher in Newark. He got me to attend Ramah when I was thirteen years old. Just two years ago he and his wife showed up at my office and Philadelphia. He said, *Ani adayin zokher et abba shelkha she'amar*, 'over my dead body he'll go to Camp Ramah'—*v'ani nitzachti oto!* [I still remember your father, who said . . . and I defeated him!] I hadn't known that my father's opposition was that strong. He had wanted me to go to some athletic camp, which I wouldn't even consider. I ended up at Ramah in Connecticut.

*Where you discovered that it was okay to be Jewish?*

Yes, and where there were counselors who thought you could be a human being even if you weren't interested in sports. My teachers at Ramah during my teenage years included Gerson Cohen, David Weiss, and Yosef Yerushalmi. When I was fifteen, David Weiss (Halivni), the camp librarian, taught me the first Gemara I ever learned.

*Was it about the four types of *shomrim* [guardians]?*

Exactly, from Bava Metziyah. Hebrew school in Newark did not

include Talmud, it was mostly Bible and Hebrew. But I continued going through high school, and by the time I was sixteen I really knew Hebrew.

*Your father remarried two years after your mother died. That must have been enormously difficult for you.*

Frieda was a loving and caring stepmother. She tried her best, but there was so much unspoken conflict in the situation. My mother's parents resented Dad for everything—including his remarriage. Naturally, this created a major loyalty conflict for me at age thirteen. Dad couldn't show any love at all. He was a 1930's intellectual who believed that the socio-economic reality was everything, and that psychology and all human emotions were "nonsense."

*Was he a big Stevenson supporter?*

Oh yes. I remember handing out leaflets for Stevenson in 1952. I can even remember the 1948 campaign, where we wrote "Dewey is shmooey" on the sidewalks of Newark.

*It sounds like your grandmother became like a second mother.*

She gave me a tremendous amount emotionally, but I had to pay for it.

*In what currency?*

Loyalty to her, and to what she wanted. Fortunately, it was what I also wanted—a Jewish life. But later, in college, when I rebelled against religion, it was, "Oy, you're not the same Arthur!"

Although she was more pious, my grandfather was the one who liked going to shul. They belonged to a traditional synagogue in Clifton, New Jersey, but with mixed seating, where they all spoke with Yiddish accents. It was a warm and informal place where a grandchild who liked to davven was welcomed and encouraged. I used to go with my grandparents for every holiday. It was very shtetl-like, and a strong contrast to the big and formal temple in Newark.

I remember the Shabbat after I returned from Ramah when I was thirteen. I went to B'nai Abraham, and because we had Hebrew school on Shabbat morning, I came into the service somewhat late. I stood quietly in my place and said the Amidah privately, and then sat down. After the service, the elderly rabbi emeritus approached me and said, "Are you the young man who was standing during services? We don't do that sort of thing here." I never went to another service there. That moment defined me as a shul Jew, not a Temple Jew.

*Beyond Ramah, did you have any connections to the Conservative movement? Did you belong to USY, for example?*

I was involved with a youth group known as LTF—Leadership Training Fellowship, which was for Ramah-type intellectuals. I'm afraid we had complete disdain for USY.

*Were you already thinking of becoming a rabbi?*

I think so. I was becoming more and more observant during high school, which caused some fights with Dad. I didn't want to take out the garbage on Shabbos, and he had never heard of such a thing. I would walk a few miles to shul, since we then lived in the suburbs, while he assumed I was taking the bus. Dad's favorite activity was playing bridge, and once a month, on a Friday night, his bridge group met at our house. One of the great humiliations of my adolescence was coming home from shul late on Friday night and as I entered this room full of cigar-smoking bridge players, somebody would inevitably say, "Here comes Martin's son, who went to Temple tonight. Can you imagine that?"

I was about fourteen. Two years later I went off to college, and I basically never came home. I always found an excuse to avoid returning to my father's house for more than a day or so.

*You went to Brandeis where you studied Judaica. With whom?*

At Brandeis my significant teachers were Nahum Glatzer and Alexander Altmann. I also studied philosophy with Herbert Marcuse. Later, at the Jewish Theological Seminary, I stayed only because of Heschel. I was an American Jewish kid who came of age at exactly the right time to catch these great immigrant scholars at the apex of their careers. I feel enormously privileged by that, and I've always seen myself as a link between them and my own, much more American students. They were all father figures as well.

College was an enormously important time for me. Among other things, I had friends for the first time. And during my freshman year we had a young dynamic Hillel director, an Orthodox rabbi whom Abe Sachar promptly got rid of because he was too effective in promoting Orthodoxy; his name was Yitz Greenberg. One of the speakers he brought in was a Lubavitcher named Zalman Schachter, who was probably the first Hasid I ever met. Soon after that I started to study Hasidism. My Hebrew was good enough that I could now read some of these texts in their original language.

*Were you reasonably frum at that point?*

Yes, but by 1958 standards, not today's. I knew nothing of the yeshiva world, for example, although here and there I spent Shabbos at Young Israel in Brookline, which was a big step for me.

*You spoke earlier of a religious crisis at Brandeis.*

During my sophomore year I started making new friends who were on a serious, personal quest for meaning. We read Erich Fromm's *The Art of Loving*, Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, Camus' *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Sartre's *No Exit*, Viktor Frankl....

*Your basic existentialist hit parade.*

Exactly. And as I read these books and came to know this other community at Brandeis, I soon came to feel that my Judaism was little more than a neurotic wall I had built to protect myself from the pain of dealing with my mother's death.

*You came to this understanding on your own?*

It came from my reading and my friends, and I decided that my previous life had been a lie. On the eve of my eighteenth birthday, I went to a diner in Waltham and ate two *treif* hamburgers, and that was it. I gave up on observance. For the first week I still tried to keep some type of Shabbos. I was determined to hold on to some form of Judaism, even if I was no longer doing the whole thing. But a week later it was all gone.

*And so was Yitz Greenberg, who might have been helpful.*

That's true. But when I stopped being observant, I felt terribly free and exhilarated. I look back on that time as one of great liberation, a kind of emotional *yeti'at mitzrayim* [exodus from Egypt].

*Did you stop taking Jewish courses at Brandeis?*

I considered switching my major to comparative literature, but I had already taken so many Judaic studies courses that I had completed most of the requirements to be a NEJS major, which left me free to study whatever I wanted. Besides, Judaica still fascinated me. In my junior year I took a course with a visiting professor from England, Alexander Altmann, and in a single semester he took us through four major ideas—God, creation, revelation and redemption—and traced each of them through four viewpoints—biblical, rabbinic, philosophical and kabbalistic. This was my first real exposure to kabbalistic thought, and I found it enormously exciting intellectually.

So while I was becoming an *apikoros* [heretic] in terms of obser-

vance, I became interested in kabbalah. I would pick up Hasidic texts in the Brandeis library, and in the course of reading the other existentialists, I also read Buber. I decided there had to be another approach to Judaism for a person who had lost his naive faith, who had decided that the Old Man in the Sky doesn't exist, who had no literal belief in revelation, who had rejected halakhic authority. Once you're on the other side of that divide, is there still a way to be a religious Jew?

*I'm struck by the amount of reading you did in college. That used to be normal, of course, but such a thing is almost unknown today.*

That's what we did; we read books and talked about them. We were intellectuals.

*Were you solemn about it?*

We had serious conversations, and we were serious, but not quite solemn. We were not quite Bohemian, but we went to coffee shops in Cambridge, listened to folk music, talked about philosophy, and drank beer. The important writers for me were Kafka and Nietzsche. Some people were a little wilder. A friend of mine lived off campus, and when Norman Mailer spoke at Brandeis in 1959, he came to a party at this guy's house and handed out joints. None of us had ever seen one before.

*Was there a point at Brandeis when you returned to observance?*

Yes. The summer before my senior year, I was asked to be on the staff of a USY encampment, and among the other staff members were several young rabbis who impressed me—Joe Lukinsky, Everett Gendler and Shammai Kanter. By then I was starting to take observance seriously again, in a new and less repressive way. In my senior year at Brandeis I was president of Hillel, and I decided to invite back Zalman Schachter, who had impressed me so much during my freshman year. I was reading Hasidic texts and was very much attracted to Hasidism—and even to the idea of going “all the way” into that community. When Zalman arrived in Boston, I picked him up at the airport, where he immediately wanted to know how he should “play it” at Brandeis. Should he dress as a Hasid? Should he wear a *kapote*? There I was, all earnest and serious, and this guy was *playing* at it, which really upset me.

But he said some good things that weekend, and he was obviously very bright and a deep thinker. On Sunday night I drove him to a synagogue on the North Shore for a speaking engagement. All weekend I had been yearning

to unburden my soul to him, to tell him about my existential crisis. When we finally started talking, he said, “You know, the *Ribono Shel Olam* is playing with your *neshama* like a yoyo.” [The Master of the Universe is playing with your soul...] I was furious, and I ended the conversation. I took this as an insensitive remark, although it doesn't sound that way to me now.

I graduated from Brandeis not knowing what to do, but I liked the idea of being a professor of Judaica—which didn't necessarily require you to be observant. People advised me that to get a doctorate in Judaica I should first go to rabbinical school to get some training in Talmud. But I hadn't even been to Israel yet, and I was a committed Zionist, so I went right after college. I found a job teaching English at night in a high school in Jerusalem, and I spent a wonderful, free year. I did a lot of reading in Hasidism, and I sat in on Scholem's courses at the Hebrew University.

When I got to New York, especially after the freedom of Jerusalem, I realized that rabbinical school was going to be a hard place for me, and every year I wanted to quit. I stayed only because of Heschel.

*What was so difficult about the Seminary?*

After Brandeis, I found it a repressive, almost medieval environment. I couldn't believe they actually took attendance in class. It was like being back in junior high, with all kinds of busy-work. I also felt that nobody there understood me. I was interested in mysticism, but instead of putting on a black coat and moving to Brooklyn, I walked around in jeans with a copy of Allen Ginsberg or Alan Watts in my back pocket. My passion for Hasidism was also part of that countercultural seeking of the meaning of life, and they didn't get that at all. At the Seminary, being “religious” meant only being *frum*, being more grounded in halakhah—and nothing else. They didn't begin to understand what spirituality was—except for Heschel. And after my first year I was given special permission to study with him.

*So on some level they did understand you. Had you read much of Heschel before coming to the Seminary?*

In high school his writings had made a great impression on me. I had read all of his then-published English-language books by the time I was fifteen. In college, when I rejected my previous interest in Judaism, Heschel had seemed trivial to me. But now I came back to him, and studying with him was a great privilege.

*Tell me about your relationship with Heschel.*

I felt very close to him, and in many ways I identified with him. We commiserated a good deal about our shared unhappiness and loneliness at the Seminary, but I refused to be his disciple. Heschel was partly a rebbe, after all, and he liked people to give him adulation. I was incapable of that.

The last time I saw him, after I graduated, I said, "Professor Heschel, it never quite worked between us. When I wanted a professor, you wanted to be a rebbe, and when I needed a rebbe, you wanted to be a professor." He smiled. But I recognize, even more in retrospect, what a great man he was. When I started teaching Judaica to young people, I realized that Heschel's writings were the best stuff there was. I have read him again and again, and he has remained very important to me, probably the most important of all my teachers.

*I understand that it was Zalman who introduced you and Kathy.*

When Zalman came to the Seminary one day, I said to him, "I've hated your guts for the past three years, ever since you told me that God was playing with my soul. What are you going to do about it?" I don't recall his answer, but at that moment we became friends.

Zalman had published an article in *Judaism* called, "Toward an Order of Bnai Or," which outlined his vision of a Jewish religious community. Zalman was then in his "Catholic" period, when everybody was Brother X and Sister Y. Jesuits signed their name with the letters "S.J.," and Zalman wanted to add the letters "B.O."—for Bnai Or. When I pointed out that "B.O." didn't sound very good, he modified it to "Bn. O." One of the people he talked about was Sister Kreindel in Chicago, and in 1964 he took me to meet her. Kreindel—Kathy—was returning from a trip to Israel with her grandmother, and they were sailing back on the Queen Mary. When we got to the ship to meet them there were ten thousand screaming Satmar Hasidism, because the Satmar Rebbe was also on board. But Kathy and I were a good match. We started going out that year, and we were married a couple of years later. Our wedding took place at the Brandeis Chapel, performed by Zalman (in *shtreimel* and *kapote*), Al Axelrad, and Everett Gendler.

*Did you experience any religious growth during your time at the Seminary?*

Yes, but mostly through my own readings, and despite the institution rather than because of it. I used to daven [pray] at various Hasidic *shTibelekh* [small synagogues] on the Upper West Side, and that's really where I learned about Jewish prayer. I would occasionally go with friends to Lubav-

itch or Bobov in Brooklyn. A lovely Lubavitcher *shaliach* [emissary] taught a Tanya class that I attended regularly in the Seminary dormitory.

Then at Ramah, in 1965, I took LSD for the first time, and it blew me away. A friend of mine knew Timothy Leary's secretary at Harvard, and he got hold of the real thing—Sandoz acid from Switzerland. LSD confirmed everything I had been reading about in the mystical texts. It opened my mind to understand that there were infinite other levels of reality beyond ordinary consciousness, and that the states these Hasidic texts were talking about, *gadlut ha-mochin* and so on, were forms of expanded consciousness. I immediately translated what happened on acid to what I had studied.

*Didn't the idea of Havurat Shalom begin to form while you were still a rabbinical student?*

One important thing that happened in this connection took place one night in Heschel's seminar. He brought in a guest, Daniel Berrigan, and in those anti-war days we all recognized that name. Berrigan was trying to get Heschel to join him in a protest which would have landed both of them in jail, and our assignment was to tell Heschel what he should do. After a while, Berrigan started telling us about new trends in the Catholic church, such as the breakup of the great parishes—which may have been his fantasy, as it later turned out—and the worker priests. Finally he said, "And what's happening these days in the Jewish community?"

I, at least, was terribly embarrassed, because I felt that nothing was happening. The Jewish community in the late 1960s was self-satisfied, suburban and bourgeois, but nothing exciting was going on, and a whole generation was turning away in disgust. These were the angry years of the late sixties, and much of the anger of young Jews—a good part of it justified, I thought—was directed toward the synagogue. I realized that night that I wanted to *make* something happen, some kind of a counter-synagogue, perhaps, although I didn't know what form that might take.

*When you graduated from the Seminary you returned to Brandeis for graduate work. Had you considered going back to Israel, where you could have studied with Scholem?*

Yes, but Scholem had a reputation for not liking Americans, and people warned me that if I studied with him it might take ten years to get a degree. I loved Israel, but after five long, mostly unhappy years at the Seminary I didn't want to be in school for the rest of my life.

I also loved Boston and was eager to return. I disliked New York and its frantic pace. Later, when I lived in Philadelphia I would drive to New York, take care of business, and drive through the tunnel feeling, “Thank God I don’t live there.” When friends in New York would invite us for Shabbos, that always struck me as a contradiction. Why would anybody go to New York for *Shabbos*?

*Did you know exactly what you wanted to study in graduate school?*

No. Altmann wanted to train me as a medievalist, which meant that I would study classical languages such as Latin and Arabic. But I didn’t have the patience to learn them. I was also becoming disillusioned with graduate school—which didn’t take very long. In my second year I decided to write my dissertation on Hayim Haikl of Amdur, an eighteenth-century radical mystic. I started reading his book, and like the good graduate student I was, I began making notes on three-by-five index cards. Before long I came across a teaching where he quotes a verse from Ecclesiastes [7:11]: *Tovah chokhmah im nachalah, ve’yoter le’ro’ei ha-shamesh*. [Wisdom is good as an inheritance, and better for those who see the sun.] Hayim Haikl took this to mean that while it’s perfectly fine to achieve enlightenment bit by bit, it’s better to stare it right in the face—to avoid any reduction of the intensity of God’s presence.

I wrote that down and said to myself, My God, he’s talking about his *madness*. He’s saying that you have to confront God directly, without the protection of intermediaries and safeguards. And here I was making *footnotes* on this guy’s madness! Then and there I decided not to pursue a doctorate. I had too much love and respect for the material to become a kind of secretary to it. But two years later, when I saw that some of my students at Havurat Shalom were starting to get their doctorates, I said to myself, “Come on, if *they* can do it....” I decided I would write a dissertation on Nachman of Bratzlav.

*What attracted you to Nachman, and how well-known was he outside his own community of followers?*

He was quite well-known because Buber had translated some of his tales into German, which were later translated into English. And one of Scholem’s disciples, Joseph Weiss, had been a scholar of Nachman. I had become aware of Nachman as an undergraduate, when I read *Liqqutey Moharan*, a collection of his homilies. Of all the Hasidic masters I had read, I found Nachman not only the most profound, but also the most understanding of doubt, which made me identify with him very strongly. I wasn’t willing to

become Nachman’s disciple, so I became his biographer.

*How thin was the line separating the two?*

There have been times in my life when I thought I could leave everything and become a Bratzlav Hasid in Meah Shearim. I resisted, because although I find Nachman very powerful, he was so immersed in his own depression and religious guilt that he would probably take me on trips I didn’t want to go on.

And yet I’ve always found it exhilarating to study Nachman. The brilliance and quickness of his mind are overwhelming. Yes, he was filled with depression, but he struggled constantly to overcome it, and in the course of his struggle with depression came his great creativity.

*Did Nachman acknowledge his depression? Did he ever refer to it directly?*

Yes on both counts. He called it by several names, including *marah shechorah*—the black bile, or *dika’on*, or *aztvut*—sadness. The Bratzlavers like to think that Nachman “overcame” his depression, but I don’t believe it’s that simple. You cope with depression, you struggle against it, and you have victories and losses. The question is what you create in the course of that struggle. That creativity, to my way of thinking, is the real victory.

*It must be frustrating when the people who are most interested in Nachman are not those with whom you can really talk about him.*

True, but there are scholars in Israel who appreciated the book. It was translated into Hebrew, and was actually on the best-seller list. Israelis know who Reb Nachman is, and even secular Israelis whom we think of as knowing almost nothing about Judaism generally have far more awareness of these things than we give them credit for. That’s part of what makes Israel so exciting, to the point that whenever I’m in Jerusalem I always ask myself why I’m not living there.

*When you visit a Bratzlav community, is it immediately and visibly different from other Hasidic groups?*

The *shuckling* [swaying] is very intense at a Bratzlav shul, but not painfully so. The joy comes through, but you can see the rich texture of a fought-for joy. There’s a lot of individuality, too, and you feel it—not just the mass experience. Nachman was such an idiosyncratic character that he attracts unusual types. There is room in Bratzlav to find your own path. The Bratzlavers are the most unconventional of Hasidim. They’re offbeat, and sometimes viewed with suspicion by other Hasidim as renegades, or a little crazy.

A Bratzlav Hasid is expected to practice *hitbodedut*—a form of communion—for an hour a day, usually late at night, and often outdoors. This daily conversation with God is the essential religious component of Bratzlav, where the Hasid pours out his most intimate longings, desires, and frustrations. Nachman said this should be done aloud, in one's native language rather than in Hebrew, because in the vernacular—which usually means Yiddish, it's easier to break your heart.

And when you meet Bratzlavers, you can *see* that they do this. It's clear that they've been through pain and that they understand the suffering of the soul. It used to be that if you walked through a certain park in Jerusalem at night, you'd hear Bratzlav Hasidim crying out to God. The practice of *hitbodedut* made a big impression on me, and it was one of the things that attracted me to Nachman. I once asked one of the Bratzlav leaders if members of his community actually did this for an hour a day, and he said, "Sometimes only forty-five minutes," which told me that in a way we were all Conservative Jews.

*What attracted you about this practice? Was it the idea of squeezing all your daily pain into a single hour?*

In part. And of course Nachman's practice is similar to that of another Jewish spiritual healer of sorts, who also recommended pouring out your heart for about an hour a day. If you're in analysis with an Orthodox Freudian, you can't see him; you might as well be talking to God. The idea in both cases is quintessentially Jewish—that there's something healing about verbalizing your pain. In Nachman's early days, by the way, the price of admission to his community was a session with Nachman where you confessed all your sins going back to childhood.

*Outside of his own community, you've probably had as big an influence as anyone on how Nachman is viewed today—and even on how well-known he is.*

When I wrote the book I felt that the two of us were wrestling, and that both of us emerged changed. There were times when I felt that Nachman was allowing me to understand him, because as long as I was working on him, he was also working on me. Nachman understands, in contrast to Spinoza, that there is a place where there is no God.

*Do you mean a place inside of us?*

He refers to a metaphysical place from which God is absent, but you're right—its real meaning is psychological. Nachman says that God is intentionally absent in order to allow faith to develop, that God does us the favor of withdraw-

ing from parts of our lives so that we can seek and stretch and grow.

*Is this the mystical concept of *tsimtsum* [divine contraction]?*

It's his version of *tsimtsum*. You know, there were rumors about Nachman that he was not quite sane, not quite kosher, and to this day some people think he went too far.

*Was that part of the attraction for you?*

Definitely.

*When Moshe Waldoks and I compiled our collection of Jewish humor, we inserted a few light bulb jokes, including, "How many Bratzlavers does it take to change a light bulb?" And the answer is, "Bratzlavers don't replace light bulbs because they know they'll never find one as good as the old one." That's probably the best-known fact about this community—that there has never been a successor to Nachman. What do you make of that?*

The relationship of Nachman's disciples to their master was so personal and intense that nothing could take its place. He writes movingly about that relationship, and says at one point that the disciple is bound to the *Zaddik* [spiritual leader] as a branch is bound to a tree. Even when the disciple is not *with* the *Zaddik*, he will still be aware of the *Zaddik's* inner rhythms. Not only is it the master's responsibility to know the disciple's true self, but for Nachman it was also the disciple's task to know and to identify with the inner life of the master.

The disciple has to be acutely aware of the master's emotional state. Lubavitch, by contrast, is trans-emotional. In Chabad, contemplative attachment to God is expected to rise above emotions. Chabad says, in essence, transcend your emotional garbage to reach God, whereas Bratzlav says you have to wade through all your emotional difficulties before you can reach God.

*Are you suggesting that these two models of Hasidism represent opposite ends of the spectrum?*

I think so, yes. But they have in common an attempt to reach out to other Jews. The Bratzlavers are not as successful or as sophisticated at it. They don't have much money, and most of them live in three communities in Israel—Jerusalem, B'nai Brak, and Tzfat (Safed).

*This may not be the place to undertake a detailed history of Havurat Shalom, but could you say a little about its origins?*



One impetus, certainly, was Dan Berrigan's visit to Heschel's class. Another was the way I had felt about my own rabbinic education. A third stimulus was a phone call from Alan Mintz around January 1968, when he said to me, "Why don't you start a yeshiva or something to keep your friends out of the draft?"

I went to Al Axelrad, who ran the Hillel Foundation at Brandeis, and said, "Al, how would you like to be a *rosh yeshivah* [head of a yeshiva]?" Al was supportive, and so was Joe Lukinsky, the third member of our three-person committee. But they both made it clear that I'd have to be the main one.

*Havurat Shalom began in the fall of 1968, a few months after Mintz's phone call. But you're reminding me that not all the original motivations were noble and lofty.*

I wouldn't say it that way. We saw fighting the draft as noble in its own way, and we were one of many Jewish institutions that offered a way out. There were some outright scams, where you literally bought *smicha* [ordination]. There were semi-scams, where you'd study somewhere an hour a week for a few months. We were providing a more honest option—a combination of alternative seminary and alternative synagogue.

I shared the idea with a few people: Michael Brooks, a senior at Brandeis who sat next to me in Latin class; Barry Holtz, whom I had known for years; Buzzy [Michael] Fishbane, who was then a fellow graduate student at Brandeis; Everett Gendler, who had a farm and a congregation nearby. Dick Israel, who was at Yale, sent us Stephen Mitchell. Jim Kugel was a draft counselor at Harvard Hillel. Joe Reimer came up from New York, having read about our plans somewhere. Several recent Seminary graduates, friends from rabbinical school, came to teach at Havurat Shalom: Eddie Feld, Burt Jacobson, David Goodblatt.

Now we needed a name, and I wanted to call it Kehillat Kodesh Community Seminary until Dick Israel said that this name was "the most pretentious thing I've ever heard." I was interested in earlier attempts to create intentional communities, and there had been a community in Jerusalem during the eighteenth century that was called Ahavat Shalom. I picked Havurat Shalom on that basis before it was decided that it would be a *havurah*. I knew the word, but I'm not sure I was aware that the Reconstructionists were using that same term. There was also Neusner's book, *Fellowship in Judaism*, about the ancient Pharisaic *havurah*.

*I was at the first retreat of the New York Havurah, which began a year later. After the Friday night meal, Alan Mintz said, "Let's bentch" [say grace], whereupon he was immediately attacked by two or three members who insisted, in effect, that our job was to create a new community without any pre-existing assumptions. Were there any similar defining moments in the early days of Havurat Shalom?*

We had a similar experience on the other side of the fence. At our first retreat, we had asked a woman in the group to make kiddush. This was the era of "creative services," and she stood up and read a little poem, something about, "I am a potato, I am an egg." There was a moment of silence when she finished, and then Joe Lukinsky got up and said, "Would anyone mind if I made kiddush for my family?"

I wasn't the only one who experienced a profound sigh of relief at that moment. For all our talk of creative or experimental prayer, what we really wanted was to make the traditional liturgy work. Zalman spent that first year with us, at a time when the group was at its most experimental, and he took me aside one morning and said, "They're going to kill davening."

*So Zalman, of all people, was holding down the conservative wing. That tells you a lot about the group.*

And about Zalman. Another important moment came during the second year, when Allen Grossman, a professor of English at Brandeis, spoke to us about the difference between poetry and liturgy. Poetry was new and innovative, whereas the power of liturgy lay in repetition. In other words, a text could be a terrible poem and still be a fine liturgical piece. It's interesting that it took a poet to help us legitimize traditional liturgy.

*You were plainly the leader of the group, although you also made it clear that you weren't altogether comfortable in that role.*

That's true. We were trying so hard to be egalitarian—in the older sense of that word, and besides, it was difficult to lead such a group even if I wanted to. When I described the Havurah to the rest of the world, I had no trouble speaking as its founder and leader. But within the group it was sometimes awkward. I, who had never been willing to be anyone's disciple, also had no ambitions to become anyone's rebbe.

*Did Zalman see himself as a competing leader?*

He recognized that Havurat Shalom was more mine than his, and that he was only going to be deeply involved for one year, so that was never a

problem. We're still close friends. Kathy and I moved to Philadelphia in 1973 to teach at Penn, and a few years later Zalman received an offer from Temple. We found him a house near ours, on Emlen Street, and that's where he created B'nai Or. Zalman's group was too new-age for Kathy and me, and between his need for discipleship and the constant flow of new people, it wasn't for us. We were looking for something more stable, so we davened at the Germantown Minyan.

*After I left Havurat Shalom, following the Yom Kippur War, I never again experienced anything remotely like it—especially in terms of the quality of the davening. Was that also true for you?*

Absolutely. We had some wonderful davening teachers, including Zalman, and some very talented people.

*We also had people who knew how to follow. Sometimes it was as simple as being in a group where religious intensity was not automatically equated with high volume, or boisterousness, or the usual interpretation of that overused word, *ru'ach*. The davening was often subtle—especially on Friday nights, when we weren't open to the public.*

The davening was frequently wonderful, sometimes breathtaking. I was often near tears. And as a teacher, I was constantly being rewarded by students who really understood, who were both knowledgeable and open, which is a rare combination. I taught a course on Nachman during those years that was one of the high points of my life.

*You must have experienced quite a shock when you moved from Havurat Shalom to a large university.*

I spent eleven years at Penn, where I learned first-hand about alienation and modern labor in a large, impersonal organization to which I felt no loyalty. I had some fine doctoral students, but over time I grew tired of the undergraduates, who by the late 1970s had become very conventional, and who were usually taking my courses to fulfill a requirement or to please their parents.

*How did you end up at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College?*

Ira Silverman, who was then the president, invited me to teach a course in Hasidism, and it was the most exciting teaching experience I'd had in years, because I could really *talk* with these people. This was a sharp contrast to Penn. When I came up for tenure, my department chairman told me not even to mention the articles I had written about contemporary Judaism or theology.

But at the R.R.C. I could talk about issues of personal meaning.

*But you, of all people, in a Reconstructionist institution?*

It's strange, I know. I had never seen myself as a follower of Kaplan, who was very much a rationalist, and whose sociological understanding of religion left me somewhat cold. But Kaplan was also addressing the same question I was: how to be a religious Jew after losing one's naive faith. Ever since I had left Havurat Shalom I had been concerned with rabbinic education, and at one point in the late 1970s a group of us even tried to create a seminary without walls, where students would travel from city to city, studying with the various teachers. I saw the R.R.C. as an institution that was open to change and growth, and the possibility of helping to make it a more serious place, both Jewishly and academically, was very appealing. There was also plenty of room to talk about mysticism and spirituality. The students were by no means 1930's rationalists, and I soon understood that this was not so much a denominational institution as a school that welcomed some of the more off-beat and interesting rabbinical students around.

*But didn't you have to be at least partly a Reconstructionist to become the dean?*

The chairman of the board wanted to make sure I didn't believe literally in the chosen people, or that God was an old man in the sky. He also wanted to establish that I wasn't a strictly halakhic Jew, and I was certainly able to reassure him on those scores. Our conversation made me realize that I had things in common with Reconstructionists. I was a traditionalist, but not completely halakhic. And I had always been uncomfortable with the idea of chosenness, because I believe there is truth in all religions.

*Still, it must have been hard for you to represent Reconstructionism when you were inclined in such a different direction.*

It wasn't easy, but it would have been difficult for me to carry *any* denominational banner, because I've always been a strong anti-denominationalist.

*You were also in office during a time when theological openness at the R.R.C. seemed to get out of control. I remember reading articles about the practice of idol-worship among some of the students. What was that about?*

I tried to make the R.R.C. a more traditional place, which meant that I had to put aside some of my own qualms about the tradition. There was a strong non-traditionalist impulse at the school, some of which was radical

feminist, and was led by students who were overtly hostile to tradition. This group felt that anything goes—including the resurrecting of Canaanite goddesses with the claim that this had been the true religion of ancient Jewish women. But I believed that there were limits to liberalism, and that neopaganism was not a legitimate Jewish enterprise. Because of my opposition, whatever was happening went underground. But it also made the papers.

Some of it was exaggerated. There were three or four women at the college who liked to describe themselves as “witches;” they meant this as a term describing a powerful, religious woman. I didn’t care for the word, which was used intentionally, of course, to upset men and challenge male authority. But I decided that if a woman needed to call herself a witch, that was less disturbing to me than outright paganism. I set clear limits as to what we would accept, and that created a controversy where I was accused of repressing creativity. My response was that commitment to tradition required some self-limitation, and that essential to a *rabbinical* school was a positive attachment to the rabbinic tradition.

*What do you think you achieved as president of the R.R.C.?*

I saw it as an opportunity to accomplish something important in rabbinic education, and to correct what I believed H.U.C. and J.T.S. were doing wrong. I came there as a havurah person. I believed that if rabbis were going to create community, rabbinical school ought to be doing that, too—that modeling, in other words, was terribly important. Other rabbinical institutions have for too long perpetuated the legacy of the pedestal; when teachers treat students condescendingly, they provide a model of rabbinic condescension toward congregants. I think I was able to develop and strengthen a vision of community in learning, in prayer, and in dealing with the issues that confronted us. This commitment to community carried over from work to home. At R.R.C., as at Havurat Shalom, Kathy and I had a very open home and a welcoming Shabbat table. In both places, a lot of community happened around that table.

*You have now returned to Brandeis as a professor, and I was both surprised and pleased when you and Kathy joined the Newton Center Minyan, as opposed to the neo-Orthodox group in our neighborhood where the level of learning is probably higher. Is this an expression of your current relationship to tradition and observance?*

I think so. We essentially live out a traditional way of life, but I’m not fully consistent about it. Kathy is steady, but my own observance has its ups and downs.

*A couple of years ago you published a book of your own theology, Seek My Face, Speak My Name.*

The book is a product of my years at R.R.C. It’s my attempt to restate the essential truths of Jewish mysticism as I have made them my own. I wrote it for seekers, some of whom were my own rabbinical students; an earlier version had the title *What Can A Thinking Jew Believe?*

*In writing the book, were you surprised by any of the ideas you found yourself expressing?*

Absolutely. I discovered a theological voice within me that I hadn’t known before. Sometimes I even felt that I was a vehicle for that inner voice.

*So writing the book was itself a religious experience?*

I haven’t quite put it that way until now, but I think you’re right. My own religious experiences have taken place as much in the classroom, while teaching, or at the desk, while writing, as they have in moments of prayer or meditation. There were times, while writing, when I felt overwhelmed by the flow of understanding.

*Even so, there must have been parts of the book that remained elusive.*

Of course. A work of theology is about God, and God is by definition elusive. My theology turns out to be fairly abstract; the God I call Y-H-W-H is identical with Being itself, but always in a mysterious and ungraspable way. A central claim of the book is that Y-H-W-H is really not a noun at all, but a form of the verb “to be” that has been artificially arrested in motion and made to function as a noun. Whenever you think you’ve got hold of such a God, it slips away and becomes a verb again. Isn’t that precisely what the Torah meant when God tells Moses “*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*”?

*But what does such a God have to do with Judaism, or with observance?*

The connection has to be a subtle one. I’m not a literalist—not about Creation, not about Revelation, not about the whole story. The underlying One of the universe that is manifest in every human mind seeks the restoration of its own unity. Since Y-H-W-H is present within each of us, the One within longs for us to be closer to one another and to treat one another with human dignity. The specific ethical commandments of all religions are our human way of responding to that sacred inner drive.

That same One seeks, as it were, to be known and regularly present in the consciousness of every person. All our traditions and rituals are ways the Jewish people has devised to respond to God's "I am" which we heard at Sinai or which we hear at every moment our hearts are open, so fulfilling those commandments is somehow God's will, even though the human role in devising them is one I don't deny. Admitting that human role also allows for fallibility, and the possibility of change when our ethical beliefs demand it. This has happened in our day with regard to the role of women, for example.

*You've been a seeker for many years. What is it, exactly, that you've learned along the way?*

Perhaps more than anything, I'm committed to a vision of life as ongoing growth, learning, and struggle. Reb Nachman would have understood this. There are great questions, both personal and religious, that confront us again and again over the course of our lives. We may resolve them at one stage, only to be challenged by them again later on. But this spiral of learning and growth is what makes life's journey so exciting, even though it isn't without pain.

I consider myself richly blessed. I love my work, both the teaching and the writing, and I hope that my efforts have contributed to making Judaism more spiritually alive and attractive for the next generation of Jews. I have come to understand, over the years, how "you shall teach them to your children" is at the very heart of spiritual life as Jews experience it. Ever since Abraham, Jews have felt an anxiety about passing on the legacy to the next generation; that's why we have such an awful time when our children intermarry. We fear that the chain will be broken, never to be repaired. I have spent my life as a link in that chain, passing on but also interpreting and adding to the traditions of the past for those who will create the Judaism of the future. I hope the tradition is just a little bit richer for my having served as one of those links.