
The Making of an American Rabbi: A Conversation with Richard Israel

William Novak

I'VE BEEN CURIOUS ABOUT RICHARD ISRAEL EVER SINCE I MOVED TO NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS, ABOUT A MILE FROM WHERE HE LIVES. FOR YEARS, IT SEEMED THAT WHENEVER OUT-OF-TOWN VISITORS came to see us, the first words out of their mouths were, "Where's your phone? I need to call Dick Israel."

Not having been employed by the organized Jewish community, I didn't know Dick through Hillel, as some of my friends did. Instead, I've come to know him through the Newton Center Minyan, a leaderless, informal and egalitarian congregation—or "havuroid," in Alan Mintz's fine phrase—where Dick has been an influential, if reluctant, leader. Or anti-leader.

A few facts: He was born in 1929 and graduated from the University of Chicago in 1950. Seven years later, he was ordained at Hebrew Union College. In 1959, after two years at UCLA, he became the Hillel director at Yale, where he remained until 1971. He then moved to Boston to become regional director of the Hillel Council of Greater Boston, where he supervised the largest Jewish student community in the country.

He retired from Hillel in 1985. Since then, he has worked for a variety of Jewish organizations. He has published dozens of articles over the years, some of which are collected in a forthcoming book, *The Kosher Pig*.

William Novak is a Boston-based writer and lecturer, and the former editor of New Traditions. He has written and co-authored a number of books, including, with Moshe Waldoks, The Big Book of Jewish Humor.

This past year Dick was interim director of the Alperin Schechter Day School of Rhode Island, in Providence. In 1992-93 he will serve as interim director of the Princeton University Hillel Foundation.

Dick and Sherry Israel have four children and two grandchildren. Sherry Israel teaches in the Hornstein Program in Jewish Communal Service at Brandeis University. In addition to Dick's Jewish involvements, he is also a marathon runner and a beekeeper.

What follows is an edited version of a conversation between us at Richard Israel's house on the afternoons of July 1 and July 2, 1992.

(W.N.) *A mutual friend once said that in a world where most people want to be Hillel, Dick Israel is willing to be Shammai. He meant that you're comfortable with discomfort, and that you don't hesitate to give the unpopular, stinging response.*

(R.I.) Shammai is a good Zen master. He often gets the short of end of the stick, so to speak, and my sympathy. I don't see myself as a Shammai-type, but like Shammai, I have gotten myself into trouble with smart-aleck one-liners.

But Shammai is not my model. The one who grabs me more frequently is the Kotzker Rebbe, who throws a sharp phrase like, "I don't want you to sin—not because it's wrong, but because there isn't enough time," and who didn't want his Hasidim to wear anything around their necks because, as he said, there should be no separation between the heart and the brain.

You're going back to Hillel work, although you've been away from it for years. This comes after you were fired from the Jewish Community Center of Greater Boston in 1985. That must have been a rough time, after such a long and successful professional history.

It was very hurtful. I also thought they fired me terribly. But in truth, I've never heard anyone say, "Yes, I lost my job, but they fired me beautifully."

At one point I decided I would go into industry. I would bring sagacity and wisdom to small businesses that were full of technical expertise, but no interpersonal skills. I went to lunch with a friendly headhunter. His first comment was, "That tweed jacket you're wearing,

it's perfect for an academic. Can we get rid of it? The yarmulke? How about the beard? Are you really committed to the beard? I need to know if you're a genuine eccentric, or whether this is just a pose. Because if it's a pose, maybe there's something we can do with you." Although I learned much from this interview, needless to say, a whole lot else didn't come out of it.

I don't know anything about your childhood, other than the fact that you're from Chicago. What did your father do?

Together with his brothers, he owned a chain of millinery stores within a larger department store. That's the business they lost in the Depression. While I was growing up, he was a jobber of ladies' hats. But as ladies wore fewer hats, it turned out not to be a growth industry.

My mother went to work to try to bring in additional income. Selling dresses, then fabric, became a buyer in the fabric department, and ultimately a buyer of children's clothing. Both of them were in the shmata business.

Did they ever call it that?

Oh, no. My mother didn't, and my father wouldn't. He wasn't a public Jew, and he never used Jewish words. The only exception was that he used to refer to people he called *rishus*, Yiddish for evil. He used it as a synonym for anti-Semite, but I always thought it was English. It's like my friend Gene Fax, who says he was an adult before he learned that *m'chaya* was not the Yiddish word for air conditioner.

What kind of Jewish family did you come from?

We lived in South Shore. Two kids—myself and my older sister. Most of the Jews were on the West side. My mother came from a typical Orthodox household of Eastern European Jews. My grandfather went to shul on Shabbos, but I suspect my grandmother kept the store open. My maternal grandparents had a kosher household.

Years later, my mother told me that I had never seen her sewing or doing laundry on Shabbat. It never occurred to me that she was a Shabbat observer after her fashion, but I guess she was. My father brought bacon into the house. We never had ham in the house, but we did have bacon and shrimp. Ham was *prust*, low class.

You belonged to a Reform congregation?

Yes indeed. My father was a strong devotee of Temple Sinai, a radical Reform temple, with services on Sunday only. That was relatively common then. I believe there are only two or three Jewish congregations in the country with a major service on Sunday. A fair number of years ago, but within my memory, the cub scouts at Temple Sinai wanted to hold a Friday night service. The board of the temple met in solemn assembly to determine when the Sabbath falls. They made a bold decision for that congregation when they acknowledged that the Jewish Sabbath still falls on Friday night and Saturday, but the congregation would continue to have its service on Sunday morning because that was when it was easiest to attend.

What was your connection to the new Jewish state? You would have been in college at the time it was established?

What Jewish state? I didn't have a clue. Zionism simply wasn't part of my experience. I was a freshman, and I couldn't understand what Maurice Pekarsky, the Hillel rabbi, was so upset about in 1948. He was following the daily battles. Why was he interested in those? Later, when I was at Hebrew Union College, I decided that the only way I could learn Hebrew would be to spend some time in Israel. This was around 1953. I came back to Chicago to visit with the assistant rabbi of the congregation, and I told him I wanted to study in Israel to learn Hebrew. The rabbi's wife said to me, "Why would you need to go to Israel to study Hebrew?"

I told her that people in Israel spoke Hebrew in the streets. "They do?" she said. She really didn't know. And this was a rabbi's wife, and also a rabbi's daughter. But that's the way it was in those days, in that community.

Were you already thinking about becoming a rabbi?

Anything but. That was unthinkable.

Despite all your Jewish involvements as a kid?

My involvement with Sinai extended not only to their high school program, but also to NFTY [National Federation of Temple Youth]. The organization had just been started, and this was my major activity during high school. I went to the first national NFTY convention, which was

held at HUC in Cincinnati around 1945. It was exciting to feel part of some larger entity.

While I was there, I had a funny epiphanal moment. We were staying in the dorms, and late at night, somebody dropped a cello case in the hall. Somebody else, a rabbinic student, yelled at him: Keep quiet, you religious son of a bitch. It was then that I realized that rabbis were people.

I've heard you tell another version of that story, involving cursing at HUC.

That's actually a different story. During the spring of my first year, the freshmen students were asked to prepare a special afternoon worship service and barbecue.

Bringing back the sacrifices? In Cincinnati?!

Not consciously, although it did make a bizarre kind of sense. Anyway, a group of us gathered in somebody's little dorm room to come up with some "creative prayers." But it didn't go well. We were running out of time, and some of the guys started joking around. At this point, another student yelled at them: "Come on! Let's get the goddamn prayers written already." That too was a moment of truth.

It was somehow important for you that a rabbinic student could use bad language.

Definitely. The only rabbi I knew was Louis Mann, who was no less than second to God.

Did you know him personally?

Certainly not! Talk to him face to face and live? Nobody knew him personally. He was a great orator. Like a lot of his colleagues, he was trained by someone said to be a Shakespearean acting coach who taught at HUC. They spoke in pear-shaped tones, and could all be heard without microphones. By the way, it was always Doctor Mann. Never "Rabbi."

So now you're in college. Do you become active in Hillel?

When I got to the University of Chicago, I had a Jewish crisis right away. The placement exams were scheduled for the first day of Rosh Hashanah. I wondered about that, but not for long. I had no intention of

letting something as old-fashioned as Rosh Hashanah get in the way of my future. After I signed up for the exams, I discovered that a notice had gone out that any student who wished to avoid that date could sign up for an alternative date. I was ashamed. I had sold out, and it wasn't even necessary.

Let me back up and tell you that shortly before I got to college, all the adult males on my father's side of the family had changed their names. My cousin had graduated from law school in the late thirties, and couldn't get a job until he changed his name. He became the model for my father's brothers. One group became Isbell, which is close to Israel. The others took the name Cordell, after Cordell Hull, the Secretary of State—and a nasty anti-Semite, by the way. I was urged to change my name, too, especially if I wanted to be a writer.

My father wanted me to change. He went under the name Irving Cordell. I once picked up his bar mitzvah siddur. He snatched it out of my hand and ripped out a page, not knowing that I had already seen the name inscribed on it: Isidore Israel.

*And "Irving" was supposed to fool somebody?**

It sounds funny today, but Irving was thought by Jews, at least some Jews, to be an Anglo-Saxon name. Somebody should do a study of regional name changes among Jews. There was a Governor Ellsworth in Connecticut, and when I lived in New Haven I met a lot of Jews named Ellsworth. In Providence, you'll find a lot of Jewish women named Hope, probably after Hope Street. In New York, there was Paddy, an Irish name—like Paddy Chayevsky.

And you became Richard Cordell?

Yes. I suspected that my Jewish friends considered me either a coward or a traitor, although nobody ever said so to my face. But my father had recommended it. On the other hand, I can't think of anything else my father recommended that I actually did.

When you got to college, you must have had some important contact with Jews, something that made you decide to go to Hebrew Union College.

I was already feeling strange because I was going under another name. Shortly after I got to college, I went to Hillel. This was during Suc-

cot, and when I walked in they were davening the *Shmoneh Esrei*. Everybody was quiet, and they were all *shuckling*, bobbing away. I thought I knew something about Judaism, but all this was completely foreign to me. I was repelled. If this is what it was, I wanted out, but I didn't think I had the right to leave before I knew what I was leaving. So I became active in Hillel.

This was all new to you?

Completely. In high school, I had found Jewishness engaging, pleasurable, and sociable. But the programs I remember from NFTY were the winter dance, or inviting the local Buddhist to tell us about his religion, or bike trips. There may have been some Jewish programs, but I don't remember any. Somehow I wanted to know more about serious Jewishness, so I got involved in Hillel. Before long I decided I couldn't live as Richard Cordell anymore. Like Jacob, I had wrestled with the angel, and had won the right to claim—or reclaim, in this case—the name Israel. I became a Jew by choice.

You mentioned that the Hillel rabbi at Chicago was Maurice Pekarsky. I've heard that name often, but I don't really know anything about him.

Norbert Samuelson was once asked to define a Hillel director. He replied that a Hillel director is someone who knew Maurice Pekarsky. Pekarsky took the Socratic method from the University of Chicago and applied it to Jewish issues. He never gave you a straight answer, but you knew he was thoroughly engaged. He was a graduate of the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York before it became an explicitly Reform seminary. He had read Kaplan, and was essentially a Reconstructionist. He loved Jewish culture, Hebrew, Yiddish, Jewish art and music. He died in the late 1950s. He wasn't a preacher. I never heard him give a talk. But he was awfully good at forcing you to figure out issues. He was a fine story-teller. After I graduated, he left Chicago to become Hillel director of the Hebrew University.

How did he influence you?

He taught me to love Jews, and to refuse to accept the going slogans of the Jewish world. He viewed himself as a revolutionary and a

visionary, trying to transform the Jewish community. He saw Hillel as the model for what the Jewish world could be, that our mission was not to replicate, but to re-create.

He wanted nothing whatsoever to do with the Federation, and for that reason he missed out on a good deal of money that could have gone to his programs. But he didn't want to be bothered by those he called the bureaucrats downtown.

Did you differ from him in any other ways?

He believed with a passion that the principle of community overrode the principle of denomination. That means that Jews could all worship together. The pattern we see today on the bigger campuses, of having different services, different denominational rabbis, was something he fought against strenuously. He hated fragmentation, and believed that one rabbi should serve the entire Jewish community.

Once, at a Hillel Summer Institute, he refused to allow a *mechitzah* service because it broke down community. I disagreed. I argued that the only way we could live together was by praying apart. I was in favor of responding to the needs of the students who wanted a *mechitzah* [partition]. I felt that in the name of *klal Yisrael* [Jewish community], he was short-sighting the real needs of *klal Yisrael*.

It's hard for me to imagine a time when people didn't defer to the frummost common denominator.

When I was growing up, nobody I knew imagined that any young Jews would remain Orthodox. We couldn't envision the Orthodox resurgence of the past twenty years. I hate Orthodox triumphalism, but I'm tempered in my judgment of it by remembering how Reform Jews used to treat the Orthodox—precisely the same way.

Did you take any Jewish courses at the university?

I couldn't. In those days, Jewish studies did not exist at most universities. There was Harry Wolfson at Harvard and Salo Baron at Columbia, but that was about it. There was nothing at the University of Chicago. If I wanted to study Judaism, it had to be at a seminary.

Then is it fair to say that you went to HUC not so much because you wanted to be a rabbi, but because you wanted to be a Jew?

Definitely. HUC was a kind of resting spot until I figured things out. I was miserable there because the Hebrew was so hard for me. I headed off to Israel, studied at Ulpan, and then the Hebrew University. But that wasn't what I was looking for, either.

I thought I'd do better to leave Jerusalem, where everybody wanted to speak English, and go to some place where nobody knew English. I ended up at Givat Washington, a training school for teachers on the land of Kibbutz Yavneh, near Rechovot. The other students were Orthodox kindergarten and primary school teachers. Mostly young women. From there I transferred to Kerem b'Yavneh, a yeshivah in the middle of a vineyard. Once, when we walked through the vineyard, somebody grabbed a handful of grapes. Somebody else cited a line from Torah that you couldn't do that. Judaism was a living religion, and that was exciting.

Even so, it must have been strange for somebody with your radical Reform background to be living in a completely observant environment.

Yes. The shaving routine startled me. I had to shave with a depilatory, which smelled awful. And I found it hard to wear *tzisis*. The closest thing we had to recreation was going over *parashat ha-shavuah* [the weekly Torah portion] on Friday afternoon. Living my life in such a regimented way was a big shock, and yet it was just what I wanted. The day was long. We studied from morning until night—Talmud, Mishnah, Rambam. We had a *musar* hour, where we had to study *Mesilat Yesharim*, a classic ethics text, very loudly, almost yelling, so it would sink into our bones.

And what, finally, did you learn there?

For years I had been trying to figure out what the essence of Judaism was. Civil justice? God and theology? Jewish peoplehood? I concluded in Israel that it was about the binding quality of halakhah. If I wanted to play the Jewish religious game, I had to play it by the rules. And that meant Jewish law. I didn't especially like these conclusions, but I found no way to escape them.

I'm surprised you were able to go back to HUC. Now that you were observant, and knowing how unobservant Reform Judaism was in the 1950s, why didn't you switch over to some other institution?

I was programmed to go back, so back I went. And I had friends there, and none at the other schools. The faculty tried to set me straight and return me to the fold. They kindly and indulgently let me know that they, too, had been where I now was, and that my newfound sentimental piety did not correspond with true, historic Judaism. They took me out for long walks to de-program me, but they were always nice about it.

Meanwhile, you were now living an observant life.

Yes. My ordination banquet was the last time I had a treif meal. I could not bring myself to refuse to eat the chicken when all these knowledgeable professors whom I respected had abandoned their own observant backgrounds. What kind of chutzpah would that have been on my part? Sherry was puzzled. She was a good Conservative Jew, so she picked among the vegetables.

So where, exactly, does Sherry come into the story?

Maurice Pekarsky introduced us when I came back to visit him. Sherry was having lunch at Hillel on Passover, and Pekarsky made the *shidduch*. We had a whirlwind romance. She decided to stay in Chicago that summer to study German and me. We were married at the end of the summer, after my ordination.

Our honeymoon consisted of driving to my first job, Hillel at UCLA. Sherry had been accepted as a graduate student at UCLA. When we arrived, she was astonished to learn that I wouldn't be driving on Shabbos. She thought she had married a real Reform rabbi.

I'd like to move the discussion into the area of prayer and liturgy. What prayer in the daily or Shabbat liturgy have you found especially problematic, and why? And how, if at all, have you resolved this conflict?

I'll answer that with two stories. When I was in India I had tea with a lady who told me about the precious siddur she received from her grandfather, and how important it was to her. Because this was India, where the roaches eat up the glue in the spines of books, valuable books are

often wrapped in cloth. She picked up a well-wrapped object, unwrapped one napkin, a second, and a third, and then said, "Oh my, I've been looking for that dictionary for months."

She spent more energy treasuring every prayer in her siddur than she spent using it. And when she finally unwrapped it, she found that it wasn't even a siddur. At some point, we have to choose whether we are more interested in protecting the integrity of the siddur, or making it accessible. If we protect it too well, we've also lost it. That's a story the liberals can tell the traditionalists.

But there's also a story the traditionalists can tell the liberals. Rav Kook, before he became chief rabbi of Palestine, was traveling in Russia. He and his entourage stopped one night at an inn. The innkeeper was Jewish. The next morning, after davening, they watched in astonishment as the innkeeper tore out a page from his big siddur, rolled it up, stuck the end into the fire, and used it to light his pipe. Rav Kook was horrified, but the innkeeper quickly reassured him. "Don't worry," he said. "I've been doing this for years, and I'm nowhere near any of the essential prayers."

Now Rav Kook and we know very well that no matter how thick the siddur, sooner or later the essential prayers will go up in smoke. That concern has kept traditionalists from being willing to make cuts.

I live in the tension between those two stories, though generally I'd much rather complain about the liturgy than change it. I want it to be available for a future encounter. It seems to me that there are three distinct styles of liturgical reform currently in use. The Reform way is to shorten the liturgy. The Conservative approach is to make small changes and fudge the translation. I prefer the Orthodox style of liturgical reform, which is to arrive late, sit in the back, and talk. Only the Orthodox approach allows you the option of recovering the text.

But surely there are parts of the service that you have trouble with.

I don't get turned on by the listing of sacrifices, but they don't annoy me. The second part of the Sh'ma used to make me angry in its assertion that rain comes, or doesn't, depending on how faithful we are about fulfilling mitzvot. But I've become more mellow about such things over the years. It all washes over me and it's fine. Shul is the place I go to

get tuned in to the kinds of religious issues I want to deal with. I see the siddur as a kind of spiritual springboard. The specifics of the words are less consequential than they once were.

That's why I've come to appreciate fast davening. Herbert Benson, who wrote *The Relaxation Response*, tried to learn whether meditation did something that could be measured. He used an Orthodox morning prayer group as one of his control groups, and discovered that traditional davening did the same thing as Transcendental Meditation in terms of your heart rate and blood pressure—but only if you didn't concentrate on the words. Prayer has more to do with emotions than with the intellect.

So where does that leave kavanah?

Kavanah is not about the words. It's about getting into and beyond the prayerbook, and moving out the other side. The words are the methodology to help us pray. They're not prayer.

Which is why specific tefillot [prayers] are not really problematic for you.

Right. And also why I find that prayer that focuses on ideology is usually dead. There's nothing more out-of-date than an up-to-date prayerbook the week after it's published.

Can you pray in English?

I pray in Hebrew far more easily. But I certainly know Jews who really pray in English. When you've done a prayer in English long enough, you can learn not to hear it. It, too, becomes a mantra, and can turn into a prayer.

Do you have a favorite tefillah?

Yes, and I had Larry Kushner calligraph it for me, but it's not one I daven. It's an aphorism I think about. It's from [talmudic tractate] Brakhot. *Aseh retzonkha bashamayim mima'al, ve-ten nachat ruach li-yrei'ekha mitachat, ve-hatov be-einekha aseh.* (Do Your will in the heavens above, and grant tranquility to those on earth who fear You. And do what is right in Your sight.)

Essentially, it says to me that I should learn to live with the world as it is without becoming a kvetch. My goal is to have absolutely no illusions but be full of high hopes.

Does anything in the siddur appeal to you in the same way?

The siddur moves around for me. It's like the underlining you do in books. Four years later, you can't remember why you underlined that particular sentence. The siddur is not a coherent statement. It's an encyclopedia of prayer. It gives you a lot of room to reconsider issues if you're in a thinking mood.

Has your religious observance changed much in the past few years? Are there no halakhic compromises that you make?

None that I'd want to talk about. I don't take pride in my areas of dissent. For the most part, I'm prepared to live with an inherited tradition.

But what about women's issues, which have led to so many changes in non-Orthodox Jewish life? Don't you have problems there?

Look, if somebody had asked me to invent a tradition, I wouldn't have invented a sexist one, sexist at least by contemporary standards. But they didn't ask me, and that's the one we've got. I'm prepared to leave the basic documents alone, but perhaps understand them differently, or think of ways to work around them, or hold myself in suspension about them. For example, when couples come to me for marriages with self-designed *ketubot* [marriage contracts], I tell them, "Yes, by all means make one. But for the wedding I feel bound to use the traditional *ketubah*."

In our tradition, marriage is initiated by men, and so is divorce. The *ketubah* was a very progressive document in the eighth century, but it can lead to terrible inequities in our day. I don't fool around with the basic process. But I ask couples to sign an additional document so that women can secure a *get* [religious divorce] if the husband refuses to give one after the issuance of a civil divorce.

What about gender-free language in prayer?

Feminists often focus on language. As I have tried to indicate, I don't. For example, I can talk about *techiyat ha-meitim* without any problem, but I have great difficulty with its translation as the resurrection of the dead. The Hebrew has enough additional resonances for me that I don't find it offensive, as I do the English. The same with God. Sure, God is male in the Hebrew text, and as long as that text stays in Hebrew, it poses no

difficulties for me, but it is something of an embarrassment in English. But my approach clearly doesn't serve those people who are more sensitive to these issues than I am. Marcia Falk talks about *Mekor ha-Chayim*, the Source of Life, as a gender-neutral way of referring to God. A noble effort. But for liturgical words to work for me, I've got to use the old formulations, and then jump.

Why am I having so much trouble getting you to talk about any liturgical changes you would like to make?

For me, the problem is that innovative liturgies take away my autonomy. If the service is a "creative" one, I never know what's going to happen. I have to depend on the leader to tell me what to think about next. But with an old set of words, I can do what I want. That's why I see so-called creative services as being restrictive, dogmatic, and arbitrary.

But the siddur is arbitrary, too.

Yes, but I'm familiar with it. I know where it's going. If I want to float off into religious reverie, talk to God, or think about what's for dinner, I can. There's a story about the Berditchever, who was in shul, and suddenly said "Sholem Aleichem" to another man. "Why?" asked the man. "Well," he replied, "I can see from your eyes that you've been on a long journey." With the traditional siddur, I can take a long trip and still be back before *Aleinu*.

During my Reform upbringing, we had creative services all the time, praising the sunset and the sky. These services articulated the things I already believed, but they didn't stretch me. They failed to address the things I didn't yet believe, or the things I hadn't even considered thinking about. I prefer a service that's difficult. If I do want to think about what the service is saying, it should be larger than I am. I don't want to invent my own religion.

Why do you daven in both an Orthodox and an egalitarian minyan?

I need both places. I don't feel comfortable in any place where I'm among the most observant and knowledgeable people around, and there's no chance of that happening to me at Sha'arei T'fillah (a modern Orthodox congregation in our neighborhood). I also like the number of

people there from whom I can learn Torah. The Minyan, however, appeals to that part of me that is anarchistic and civil-libertarian, because people are not as constrained by a single, agreed-upon set of rules.

I like the Minyan's small size, self-government, communalism, and informality. Although I was one of its founders, the special appeal of the Minyan has never been its egalitarianism.

But you can certainly understand why some women in the Minyan find that attitude upsetting.

Of course, and with them, I can't imagine that God doesn't want women to know Torah or thinks it's wrong for a woman to lead the davening. I say that as a Jew who can't sing, and who knows full well that some of the female members of the Minyan can lead services a lot better than I'll ever be able to. So I try not to get in the way. I know that is pretty irrelevant, but it's the best that I can do.

But I've always had trouble with women wearing *kipot*, because that seems to me to come out backwards, to affirm the supremacy of men in the same way that women put on pants, but men don't wear dresses. There already is a traditional head-covering for women: hats.

When you daven, is anyone listening?

I'll answer that one with another story. Years ago, Zalman Schachter was running religious workshops at Camp Ramah in Connecticut. He had heard that a Baptist minister was praying over pea plants, urging God to make the plants he was praying for to be bigger and healthier than the ones he wasn't praying for. And this, the minister reported, actually happened.

When Zalman heard about the experiment, he decided it should work for Jews, too. Except that he would do it more scientifically, in a double-blind experiment. So he and a group of kids planted two rows of beans. One kid got to pick the row of beans they would pray for, and kept it secret from everyone else. He hid the designation in the camp safe. They directed the *Ana B'khoah* prayer, which is in both the daily and the Friday night service, toward the one row of plants. Not knowing which was the right row, they took care of both rows equally. At the end of the summer they found that the beans in one row had done a lot better. But it turned out that this was not the row which had been selected for the prayers.

The kids asked Zalman to explain it, and this is what he said: “If the beans in the row we were praying for had become big, we would learn from this that God could be manipulated. If both rows had remained pretty much the same, we would learn that God doesn’t listen to prayer. This way, we learn that God does listen—but He does what He wants.”

And that speaks to you?

Actually, my own experiences with divine intervention took a different form. I was at an Orthodox service at another shul in the neighborhood, and during the rabbi’s first pro-Begin sermon, the Israeli flag fell over and hit him on the head.

Why do you keep kosher?

Because it’s a pain in the neck. As a result, it’s a fine Jewish centering exercise. It makes me worry about Jewish issues at times when I’d rather be eating. This is not the way I phrase it when I’m asked as a rabbi. Then, I tell people that kashrut is a way of reminding yourself of both Jewish and more general ethical issues at a time you’re doing something routine and animal.

Does God care if you keep kosher?

There’s a series of three questions I learned from Larry Kushner that I use when I try to understand why I’m doing what I’m doing. Am I doing it because God wants me to? Because the Jewish people want me to? Or because I want to?

There are many more Jewish things that I do because I want to do them, than because God wants me to. I don’t believe God really cares how many hours I wait between milk and meat. I think the Jewish people care. It’s during Pesach that I’m most acutely aware of your question. Do we cover the kitchen counters? Do we eat corn oil? I believe that God wants me to think about freedom on Pesach. I don’t think He cares whether I eat corn oil.

By the way, do you know why Ashkenazim don’t eat corn on Pesach? Corn was unknown during rabbinic times, but corn is the Yiddish word for rye, and Ashkenazic rabbinic authorities thought we might get confused.

Here’s something I’ve always wondered about. Do you happen to know where the popular tune for the modern Birkat Ha-Mazon [Grace after Meals] came from?

At the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, Mordecai Kaplan asked Cantor Abe Nathanson to write music for the first section of *Birkat Ha-Mazon*, so it wouldn’t always be mumbled. Kaplan wanted such “sancta” to be aesthetic experiences. Today it’s sung by people who would be horrified if they knew it was a Reconstructionist tune.

I had a feeling you’d know. You pay attention to these things.

Temperamentally, I’m an anthropologist. I like to watch. Maybe that’s why I’ve never really thrown my whole *neshamah* into any organization, institution, or movement.

How can you say that after all the time and energy you’ve spent on Jewish life and community?

That’s different. I’ve bet my life on them.

