

Checking in with Moshe Waldoks

William Novak

MOSHE WALDOKS AND I HAVE BEEN CLOSE FRIENDS FOR TWENTY YEARS. DURING THAT TIME WE'VE HAD HUNDREDS OF CONVERSATIONS, INCLUDING QUITE A FEW ABOUT OUR COLLABORATION ON TWO LARGE humor anthologies: *The Big Book of Jewish Humor* (1981) and *The Big Book of New American Humor* (1990). Sometimes the best ideas are almost too obvious to see, which may explain why it only recently occurred to me to try to capture Moshe's unique voice on the page.

Although he has taught at Brandeis and elsewhere, Moshe's professional identity doesn't fit into any existing category. Among other things, he has worked as an actor, writer, lecturer, humorist, cantor, rabbi, Hillel director, television producer, gadfly—and the list goes on. Above all he is a teacher.

Moshe lives in Newton, Massachusetts, with his wife Anne Pomerantz Waldoks, and their three daughters: Shula, Brina, and Risa.

What follows is an edited version of our four conversations—two in person and two more over the phone—between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur 1993.

So what's on your mind these days?

I've been toying with the idea of a theater piece that would bring together several different strands I've been thinking about: my trip to India to visit the Dalai Lama, my mother's death, the Lubavitcher Rebbe...

It's been done.

Yeah, I guess so. I've also been thinking a little more about Herzl.

The opera? Or the possibility you once mentioned that instead of an opera, you might develop a monologue about such an opera?

Both, actually. I was just reading an article about a new opera by Steve Reich called *The Cave*. It's about *Ma'arat Hamakhpelah*, where Abraham and Sarah are buried.

Not another opera about that?

Amazing, isn't it? There's this whole new trend of historical operas, with *Einstein on the Beach*...

"Nixon in China"...

Right, and the recent one about Leon Klinghoffer.

In that context, your Herzl idea sounds almost mainstream.

Think about it. Both his biography and his ideas were larger than life, so you'd need a grand medium to present it.

And a feature film along the lines of "Gandhi" would be incredibly expensive.

What I have in mind is more surrealistic. I'd want to include characters Herzl might not have actually met, such as Freud and Kafka.

A couple of years ago we were both excited about Ernst Pawel's biography of Herzl. Did that book push you in this direction?

No question. *The Labyrinth of Exile* captures Herzl's complexity, including his self-centeredness and his inability to delegate. Herzl also had a vivid sense of his own ultimate demise. He had a heart condition, and by his late thirties he knew he wouldn't have a long life. But in just a few years he accomplished so much! He came out of nowhere, and was able to create a whole new focus of Jewish identity which transcended all other attempts of the enlightenment.

So it wasn't just the beard?

Tremendous beard, no question, but there was more to the man than his facial hair. He had a remarkable ability to inspire people—not only the masses, but also the intellectuals and a number of people in power. He also had some fantastic self-delusions that were very helpful.

Helpful in what sense?

In that they allowed him to overlook the obvious pitfalls of his plan. Think about it: Herzl is one of the very few utopians of that era—of *any* era, really, whose vision actually came into being. He had a unique way of interpreting the Jewish historical experience without allowing any real knowledge to get in the way. It's remarkable.



Do you think Herzl was as ignorant about Judaism as we've been led to believe?

I have the impression he played down what knowledge he did have. The conventional wisdom is that Herzl came from an assimilated family, but by contemporary standards it was still fairly traditional. He had a grandfather who supported Rabbi Alkalay, one of the precursors of Zionism. So who knows? Maybe some of those ideas were implanted in his head when he was a boy.

When you imagine this opera about Herzl, how does it begin?

It would open with Herzl's famous nightmare—the dream that supposedly explains his passion. If his plan failed, Herzl was convinced there would be an inevitable violent outburst against the Jews of Europe. In his dream, he imagines a frightening alternative: he envisions the Jewish children of Vienna being converted to Christianity *en masse*, so to speak, at the Cathedral of St. Stephen.

Speaking of dreams, did Herzl ever meet Freud?

Not that we know of, although they certainly knew of each other.

And they both lived in Vienna, so it's possible.

We do know that Freud had seen a play of Herzl's, *The New Ghetto*, which inspired Freud's well-known dream about Hannibal. But I think it's just as well that they didn't meet. Just imagine it: Herzl would have said, "I have this dream," and Freud would have replied, "Okay, let's talk about it."

So the opera opens with the conversion of the Jews.

It starts with an aerial shot of Vienna—this part would be on video. We descend through the clouds until we see the spire of the Cathedral. The church bells become increasingly loud. We see lines of people—and soon we recognize them as Jewish children, who are ascending the steps of the church on their knees to be baptized by the Cardinal.

Meanwhile, Herzl is already on stage—asleep in his bed. The chorus sings a requiem. Then his daughter Margarethe sings of her father's recurring nightmare. She's in Tereizenstadt, where she died. When her song is over, Herzl wakes from his

dream and yells *Mama!* Behind him on the wall is a big blow-up of that Herzl face we all know, only the eyes are laser beams that shoot out into the audience. Then the monitors go black, and Herzl begins to sing in a deep melancholy voice.

Let me stop you before you give it all away. It's a dramatic opening, but presumably the opera has some lighter parts, too.

Sure. Two of the recurring characters are Bacher and Benedikt, the editors of the *New Free Press*, where Herzl wrote his pieces and columns. In one scene they're dressed as waiters, and two of their co-workers join them to form a barbershop quartet. Herzl's editors would like him to tone down all this nonsense about a Jewish homeland, and they sing a song called, "How would you like your state?"

Well done. Before long it will be time to celebrate the centenary of the first Zionist Congress in 1897, so you better get moving. Could this be a role for Ron Silver?

Too short. I was thinking of Mandy Patinkin. You know, with a beard and the right makeup...

Let's talk a little about your own biography. You were born in Toledo...

Only by accident. My parents came over from Munich on the Fourth of July, 1949. Later, our family used to visit the Statue of Liberty every year on that day. They were assigned to Toledo. I was born two weeks later. They arrived in America by plane, which was rare in those days, but my mother was very pregnant.

This was already four years after the liberation of the camps.

Yes. A year after the liberation, on July 4, 1946, there was a pogrom in southern Poland. This served as a message that nobody should hold out any hope about postwar Poland as a sanctuary. Everyone who could, fled. Many, including my parents, went to the American Zone in Germany. They were both in a DP camp, which is where they met.

My mother came from Sosnowiec, in Poland—the same town that Art Spiegelman's father came from, and Menachem Rosensaft's mother, too. My father was Russo-Polish. He was drafted into the Soviet army before the Nazis invaded, which made him one of the few Jews in history whose life was *saved* by Stalin. He then deserted the army with a group of fellow Jews. The whole group ended up in Uzbekistan, where they were far from the front and many miles from the other big killer—starvation.

And eventually your parents end up in Toledo.

When they arrived in America, my father implored my mother to do

whatever she could so they wouldn't have to leave New York. After all, she was pregnant. He had a fairly good idea of what New York was like, but he knew nothing about Toledo except that it wasn't a great metropolis.

And oddly enough, it still isn't.

That's true. I finally went back there after all these years, to speak to a UJA group. And I have to be honest with you: it still didn't look all that much like New York. After a year in Toledo, my parents moved to St. Louis, and from there to New York.

In the seventies, when I was teaching Malamud's novel, The Assistant, to freshmen at Tufts University, you told me that your father's grocery store in Brooklyn came right out of that book.

Yes, he had a small store in Bedford-Stuyvesant all through the fifties and sixties. It was a tough area even then. He was always being held up, and when I was twelve, he almost died after being shot in a robbery. He kept long hours, six days a week. We lived in the Bronx, and he commuted an hour and a half each way. Eventually we moved to Brooklyn.

So you and your brother couldn't have seen him that much.

We didn't. He came home late, and by then he was exhausted. Now that I'm in my mid-forties, I can appreciate how tiring it must have been to be on your feet all day.

It's clear that you had a good Jewish education.

I was sent to various yeshivas. One was a non-Zionist, Lithuanian school, an offshoot of the famous Chaim Berlin Seminary in Brooklyn. Later, I attended the Yeshiva University High School for Boys—also in Brooklyn.

How was the non-Zionist element manifested in your elementary school?

It was always there, but before 1967 it wasn't much of an issue. Some of my friends went to Hebrew-speaking *yeshivot*, and they were always raising money to buy trees in Israel. Our school, on the other hand, would be visited by an older man with a long beard who would tell us in Yiddish that Ben Gurion was evil because he allowed Christian missionaries to come into *Eretz Yisroel* to convert the children. We were told to support the *p'eylim*, the religious activists. They gave out little books with tags—exactly the same fundraising technique as the kids who were raising money for trees.

What was the level of Zionism in your home?

My father was a Revisionist, so I grew up hearing about Jabotinsky. In 1965 he took me to a special ceremony in Manhattan for the re-interment of Jabotinsky's bones in Israel. Back in the late 1930s, Jabotinsky was so confident

about the ultimate triumph of Zionism that he wrote in his will that his remains should be carried to *Eretz Yisrael* "only on the instructions of a Jewish government." But Ben Gurion never invited the bones in, so the Revisionists had to wait until Levi Eshkol came to power.

Do you remember anything from that ceremony?

It was like a state funeral. Every Revisionist in the world, or at least the tri-state area, got up to speak. And each speech was an oration, with everyone trying to emulate, or outdo, the fiery style of Menachem Begin. Betar kids were there in uniform. Jabotinsky had died in 1940 at a Betar summer camp.

Of a heart attack.

The kids at the camp always said it was the food.

You wrote your doctoral thesis on Hillel Zeitlin [the Polish-Jewish journalist and writer]. Did you ever consider writing about Jabotinsky?

So many others had done it. I suspect I chose Zeitlin because I was looking for my *zeyda*. Unfortunately, I picked a man with very little sense of humor.

But with a wide variety of interests.

No question. Among other things, he was fascinated by Hasidism, mysticism, and the occult. For thirty-two years, he wrote a column twice a week for *Der Moment*, the largest Jewish paper in Poland. He wrote biographies of several Hasidic masters, including one on Nachman of Bratzlav. He wrote books on both Nietzsche and Spinoza. And he began the project of translating the Zohar from Aramaic into Hebrew.

He would have been at home in our own Jewish circles.

Definitely. Zeitlin was interested in creating a non-partisan Judaism in Poland, and he spoke out against the many political and ideological divisions of Polish Jewry. He even tried to establish elite *havurot* to enhance Jewish spirituality. He had a big influence on Heschel, and also on Zalman Schachter.

A lot has been written, and said, about the effects of the Holocaust on the second generation. That must have been a big factor in your childhood.

Very much. After I left elementary school, where many of our teachers were survivors and the students were children of survivors, I often found I had more in common with the parents of my friends than with my own peers. In those days, many survivors didn't really talk about the Holocaust outside of their own small circles. With all the profound effects of the *Shoah*, those conversations were still light years away from American Jewish life until the 1970s.

William Helmreich deals with this very movingly in his recent book, Against All Odds, about Holocaust survivors and their new lives in America.

It was definitely a conversation-stopper, and the gap between the two worlds was enormous. When American Jews spoke of the worst experiences of their lives, they might focus on some major disappointment—like being fired, or not getting into the college of their choice. It's hard to compare that to having ninety of your closest relatives killed off within a year.

I'm the product of an upheaval, which happened to be a historical upheaval. I know that I exist only because of those events. My parents were a mismatched pair created by this tumultuous bump in history. There wasn't a lot of romance. Among children of survivors there's a real difference between those whose parents met after the war—as mine did—and those whose parents met earlier.

On the one hand, all of this is a powerful impetus for achievement. On the other, it's a difficult burden to bear. No matter how much our parents wanted to protect us, many of us grew up feeling that we were impossible and inadequate replacements for other children, other families. My brother and I knew we were loved, but our parents, like so many survivors, felt guilty for surviving. And some of that gets passed on.

But it seems to me that you have turned much of that into something positive—such as your link to pre-war Jewish life in Eastern Europe.

That comes from my mother, who maintained a deep connection to the positive things she experienced before the war. For me the Eastern European experience became vitally important. This was a world where people had great access to joy, and to family. My mother was a teenager when the war broke out, so she had vivid memories of how Shabbat was celebrated, and the discussions around the table. Many of the survivors came from very rich and variegated lives. This was a highly political society, which meant that within a single extended family you might have a representative of every possible ideology.

Being a child of survivors has been terribly important to me. At the same time, I shy away from the syndrome that tries to explain everything by virtue of this fact.

As Leon Wieseltier once put it, "...and that's why I don't like iceberg lettuce." It's easy to trivialize it—especially compared to the trauma suffered by the survivors themselves.

Yes. But as the events recede, and the survivor generation dies off,

anyone who had contact with those events, even secondary, now has a certain responsibility to tell the story.

It's a delicate challenge, to keep it alive without dwelling on it.

I can't prove it, but I have a gut feeling that one reason we've had such an alarming increase in intermarriage in the past twenty-five years is precisely because we have been so successful in selling the *Shoah*, in portraying ourselves as victims. I sometimes wonder if this has resulted in some broad, subconscious desire to escape all that. We have found it difficult to view ourselves as victims—or as victors, for that matter. It's time to acknowledge that this need to find our primary meaning either through the *Shoah* or through the State of Israel has been a failure.

I'm interested in how you made the transition from the Orthodox yeshiva milieu of New York to the world of havurah-style Judaism.

I went to college at NYU, and in 1967-68 I spent my junior year in Israel. I ended up staying for three years, and I completed my undergraduate work in a new department at the Hebrew University—the history of Jewish thought.

All this was shortly after the Six Day War.

Yes, although the period *before* the war was equally important: the photographs of hostile Arabs, the withdrawal of the U.N. troops from Sinai, Abba Eban at the United Nations, and the tremendous tension of those weeks. I remember going to a rally for Israel in Lafayette Park, opposite the White House. The Bostoner Rebbe was there, and I think he was the only traditional Jewish leader who participated. He believed in the larger Jewish people, which was a revelation to me because I was raised in an environment where a non-Orthodox Jew was not considered a full human being. Once, in high school, I went to services at the Union Temple, a big Reform congregation on Eastern Parkway. I was curious: what could they be doing in there: offering up their children to wooden idols? What I found was a rather boring Reform service in the classical mode. I failed to see why this was such a terrible threat.

And in Israel you were exposed to still other types of Jews.

I was riding on a kind of cultural carousel. I had one foot in the theater department at the university, where I was part of a politically-inspired production of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, directed by Joyce Miller. I had another foot in Me'ah She'arim, where I liked to visit the Bratzlav community. And I was attracted to the growing artistic community of Jerusalem, which centered around

a cafe called Ta'amon on the corner of King George and Hillel Streets.

What was that scene like?

There was a fair amount of mind expansion of various kinds. We were open to many different experiences, which is always easier when you're young and single and six thousand miles from home. It was a time that Israel had never seen before and would never see again. The economy was stable, the enemy was defeated, and aliyah was still on the agenda.

Was it on your agenda?

Sure. I made aliyah any number of times, and I look forward to doing it again.

But by 1974 you were already traveling in havurah circles. What was your entry point into that world?

I heard about it in Israel. Actually, I heard reports about the Jewish cultural scene at Brandeis, with professors like Nahum Glatzer, Alexander Altmann, and Ben Halpern—who later became my thesis advisor. I applied to Brandeis and was accepted in the doctoral program in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies.

Where does the Pardes Institute fit in?

That came a little later. Pardes was founded in 1972 by Michael Swirsky, who had been part of Havurat Shalom in Boston. It was designed as an informal school for college graduates, mostly Americans, who wanted to be introduced to the world of classical Jewish texts. Swirsky's insight was that he would get the leading teachers in Israel to come together and spend at least one day a week in a non-denominational setting. And it worked. He recruited people like Adin Steinsaltz, David Hartman, Eliezer Shweid, Michael Rosenak, and others.

And where did the money come from?

Pardes was funded by the World Zionist Organization, but the money came from one of their secular divisions—the Youth and Halutz department. Their Torah division wouldn't touch it because Pardes was co-ed.

And not entirely Orthodox.

Right. I was a junior faculty member in 1973 and 1974. In the spring of 1974 I was asked to visit the U.S. to recruit students for Pardes.

Which is around the time that we met.

Exactly. You and I met at the Jewish Men's and Women's Conference at the McAlpine Hotel in Manhattan. I had spent the previous two weeks visiting various Hillel groups, who were the natural constituency for Pardes. I was impressed by much of what I saw, which was a lot less depressing than the Israeli

scene after the Yom Kippur War. When I went up to Boston, Dick Israel asked if I would consider a new Hillel position which had been created at Tufts University.

You were in America to bring people to Israel, but you ended up moving to Boston.

I did bring some people to Israel; I just didn't go back with them. I worked for Hillel at Tufts in the mid-1970s while I was a graduate student at Brandeis.

And you lived directly across the street from Havurat Shalom.

Yes. When Michael and Sharon Strassfeld moved to New York, I took over their apartment. Danny Matt lived upstairs, and I got to know the second wave of Havurat Shalom people and a couple of the veterans, like Michael Fishbane and Everett Gendler. Art Green was on his way to Philadelphia, but I had heard him speak years earlier. I was a high school student, and he was in the vanguard of the Soviet Jewry movement in the early 1960s. He was impressive even then. Anyway, the havurah world kept me involved in practicing Judaism. It gave me a place to stop and integrate many of my interests in a supportive and creative environment.

Did your interest in Jewish humor come out of this period?

Yes. I started lecturing on Jewish humor, and performing, and then we did the book.

I remember the night we decided to work together. Richard Siegel, who had worked with the Strassfelds on The Jewish Catalog, had real, live contacts in the publishing world, which was terribly exciting. He asked if I'd be interested in preparing an anthology of Jewish humor. I figured it could be done quickly and easily, and my first thought was to involve you as a consultant. You and I met for coffee that night, and you convinced me not only that we should become partners, but that this book should be far more ambitious and imaginative than the straight-forward, one-dimensional project I had in mind. I was excited by the idea, but I was also hesitant. "What about the old adage that you shouldn't do business with your friends?" I asked you. And you said, "Then who should you do business with?" I thought that was a good answer, and it was.

And the rest was history. *The Big Book of Jewish Humor* became a calling card, and I've been traveling and speaking on Jewish humor ever since.

Me, too. But humor is only one of your topics.

True. These days I do weekends on "The Power of Positive Judaism," which includes humor, prayer, theology, media, and our need to develop more of a popular culture.

What's your primary message when you go out and speak?

I think our challenge as American Jews is to demonstrate that it's

possible to create an unorthodox spiritual life. Assuming that the recent movement toward peace in the Middle East turns out to be real, the polarization between religious and secular Israelis will grow more severe. The tenuous middle ground in Israel will need our support. The challenge is to show that you can live in freedom and maintain a spiritual connection with Judaism.

In other words, that freedom doesn't have to be the enemy. I'd like to think that the recent trans-denominational thinking within American Judaism could be a step in that direction. In any event, how would you hasten that process?

I can imagine a scenario where, in order to reach out to the masses of American Jews who are currently untouched by institutional Judaism, we see the inauguration of Shabbat Synaplex services. These would be held at the many Cineplex theaters in our suburban malls, which are normally empty on Saturday morning. Various kinds of services could be held simultaneously, each taking advantage of the latest audio-visual techniques. And think of the kiddush that would follow—popcorn, ice cream bon bons, Raisinettes, Snow Caps. Among other things, this might satisfy the almost biological need of some Jews to visit a mall every Saturday.

And while we're at the mall, I'd also love to open a spiritual adventure store called Eternal Life. Clients would come in and describe their life situations, and our spiritually-trained "travel" agents would prescribe an itinerary.

But wouldn't every client end up with the same advice?

Does every client at a travel agent wind up in the same destination? The Caribbean would be awfully crowded.

But these clients are all seeking eternal life.

Yes, but they'll find it in different places. Some through their children, some through their work, some through religion. For our Jewish clients, I would recommend the 52-week stress-management Shabbat program, which allows you to travel to your spiritual goal through a virtual reality machine. Shabbat is an "as-if" time when we are released from the constraints of the mundane and can imagine what our lives would be like when we are truly free.

Since I've known you, your own Shabbat observance has become a lot more relaxed.

Having kids has forced us to redefine what Shabbat observance is for our family. We actively try to make the day different by refraining from mundane activities, but we are joyfully inconsistent. I now see it as a positive commandment to drive to Shabbat events if the alternative is not to go. Most kids crave consistency. We try—and this is difficult—to keep our kids with us for all

Shabbat meals, which can be stressful with the younger ones. What I try to communicate is that Shabbat is a reservoir that can be dipped into to enhance your creativity during the rest of the week.

Because you don't fit into any established categories, people are always asking me, "What does Moshe actually do?" How would you answer that?

It changes. These days I do a lot of speaking for Jewish groups, and some teaching. I'm trying to assemble a collection of the best American humor of 1993. And I've been working on a new Purim companion called *The Gantse Megillah*, which the Jewish Publication Society will be bringing out next year.

Purim is really your holiday. If it came along every month, you'd be set for life.

From your mouth to God's ear. As the old saying goes, "So many Hamans and only one Purim." I'd like to see Purim become *the* major American-Jewish holiday. Let's face it: Hanukah is always a disappointment. No matter how you slice it, it's the Jewish Christmas. The gift-giving is endless, and it invariably leads to disappointment.

Purim, on the other hand, is the ideal holiday for American Jews. It takes place in the spring, right around St. Patrick's Day, when everybody feels Irish. Here's a day where everybody can feel Jewish.

Are you serious? To me, Purim seems like the most difficult holiday to enter—that is, unless you're already deeply involved with Judaism. Otherwise there's nothing to make fun of.

The basis of Purim is *carnivale*—the breaking of the bonds of winter and the acknowledgment of the rebirth of spring.

You know, I could have sworn we had a different holiday exactly a month later that celebrates that very thing.

Purim is the *passionate* expression of spring, the Dionysian counterpart to the Apollonian *seder*—order—of Passover. We need both. The medieval rabbis were afraid that Purim might get out of hand, so the tradition developed that Purim marked the beginning of the intensive four-week period of preparation for Passover. And so Jewish women, especially, have spent these weeks in a physical re-enactment of the slavery of Egypt, which ends only after the last guests depart from the second Seder.

But imagine if Purim became the official Jewish-American celebration,

and the best of Jewish talent in humor and in show business were recruited to produce Purim plays and other performances on national television. Imagine the annual PBS Purim *shpiels*. Or the annual Purim parades in large cities, sponsored by the Bronfmans.

Who better to sponsor a Purim parade?

Exactly. And what are we celebrating? We're celebrating receiving the Torah.

No—that's Shavuot.

Actually, Shavuot celebrates the *giving* of the Torah. Purim is about our *receiving* it—but without the mountain held over our heads.

That sounds to me like a stretch.

You can blame the Midrash. The traditional view is that when the Messiah comes, the only holiday to remain intact will be Purim—because Purim ultimately validates the giving of the Torah. According to the rabbis, the saving act of Purim provided an opportunity for the Jews to accept the Torah of their own free will without any sense of coercion.

That sounds a little serious for Purim. So I'll end by asking what kinds of jokes you're hearing these days.

In addition to the ubiquitous lawyer jokes, which everybody knows about, there's been a wave of jokes about older people—especially in nursing homes, or with dementia. I heard this one when my father was going through this awful experience in his final years.

An older man is sitting on the curb, crying. A young man stops and asks him, "What's wrong?"

"How old do you think I am?" the older man asks.

"I dunno, maybe sixty-five?"

"I'm eighty-two."

"That's fantastic," says the younger man.

"But that's not all. All my kids are doctors and lawyers. And after my wife passed on, I recently married a gorgeous twenty-four-year-old. She comes from Paris, she's a gourmet chef, and she works part-time as a model."

"That's incredible," says the younger man. "So why are you crying?"

"I forgot where I live!"