

Berel Wein

TEACH  
THEM  
DILIGENTLY

ושננתם לבניך

THE PERSONAL STORY OF  
A COMMUNITY RABBI

Maggid Books

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## Chapter 1

# Early Influences

*“How are you going to help rebuild the Jewish People?”*

One of my most vivid childhood memories is of my father taking me with him to Chicago’s Midway Airport to greet Rabbi Isaac Halevi Herzog, the chief rabbi of Palestine after the Second World War. Almost all the distinguished Orthodox rabbis in Chicago came to the airport that day to welcome him. I remember him alighting from the plane and walking down the stairs in his shiny top hat, holding his cane in one hand and a Tanach (Bible) in the other. With his silver beard and aristocratic demeanor, he was a majestic presence.

We all accompanied Rabbi Herzog to the yeshiva, where he delivered a forty-five-minute Talmudic lecture in Yiddish. I still remember his topic, and though I was not yet *bar mitzvah*, I pretty much followed his discourse. After that, he addressed us in English. Having been a rabbi in Dublin, he spoke with a slight Irish brogue, which I found somewhat incongruous with his Eastern European rabbinical appearance.

Rabbi Herzog told us he had been to the Vatican and had asked Pope Pius XII to return the thousands of Jewish children entrusted to Catholic institutions in Europe by parents hoping to save them from annihilation at the hands of the Germans. The pope had flatly refused, claiming that since all the children had been baptized upon entering those institutions, they could not now be given over to those who

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would raise them in a different faith. Overcome with emotion, the rabbi put his head down on the lectern and wept bitterly. We were all in shock, as the enormity of the Jewish tragedy of World War II began sinking in.

Then Rabbi Herzog defiantly raised his head and looked at the young men gathered before him. “I cannot save those thousands of Jewish children,” he declared, “but I ask of you – how are you going to help rebuild the Jewish People?” Afterward, when we filed by him to shake his hand and receive his blessing, he repeated to each and every one of us: “Did you understand what I said to you? Don’t forget it.”

All my life, Rabbi Herzog’s words have echoed in my ears and soul. Numerous times in my rabbinic career, I’ve been discouraged and downhearted. But then I remembered his words. They have continually inspired and challenged me, shaping many of my decisions and actions.

To put those decisions and actions into context, we must go back to the beginning. I was born in Chicago on 9 Nisan 5694/March 25, 1934. I was named after my paternal grandfather, Dov Berel, who had just passed away at a relatively young age as life spans go in the Wein family. And yes, my name – Berel Wein – was the butt of many jokes during my school years. My parents refused to anglicize the name or allow me a more American alternative. I sometimes resented that, but ultimately my name became a source of pride.

As an only son, I was an adult from the moment I was born. My father, Rabbi Zev Wein, was a distinguished rabbi in Chicago, and my mother, Esther Rubinstein Wein, was the daughter of Rabbi Chaim Zvi Rubinstein, also a leading congregational rabbi in Chicago, the founder and one of the *roshei yeshiva* (deans) of Beis Medrash L’Torah/Hebrew Theological College (then of Chicago, and currently in Skokie, Illinois). My mother was an accomplished teacher and very formidable, both intellectually and personally.

The Wein family was from the small Lithuanian village of Ratzki, near the Prussian border. They had lived there for generations, serving as renowned rabbis and lay leaders. My aunt Shoshana Freed once told me we were descended from Spanish exiles who eventually got to Lithuania,



Right to left: Me, my father, and my son Chaim Zvi

and the name Wein originated from a stopover in Vienna. Apparently, such renaming was not uncommon. Rabbi Baruch Halevi Epstein, author of *Torah Temimah*, relates that his original family name was Benevisti and that his ancestors also traveled from Spain to Lithuania, stopping in the German city of Ebstein. He states that every Epstein who's a Levi is really a Benevisti, a descendant of Spanish Jewish exiles.

At any rate, my father left Ratzki to attend the Slabodka Yeshiva (also in Lithuania) for one year and then transferred to Yeshiva Shaar Hatorah in Grodno, Poland/Lithuania, headed by the legendary Rabbi Shimon HaKohen Shkop. My father often told me that whenever he imagined the high priest of Israel, he pictured Rabbi Shkop.

Immediately after World War I, Shaar Hatorah lacked a full set of the Babylonian Talmud. In fact, in all of Grodno only one complete set had survived the war (and later pogroms), and its very rich owner kept it under lock and key. So Rabbi Shkop set out to create a "living Talmud" in his yeshiva. He sent students to the man's home to memorize the tractates missing from the yeshiva's own library. My father was one of those students. He committed to memory tractate Chullin as well as several others. Gifted with a prodigious memory and great diligence in his Torah studies, my father could later recall entire tractates by heart, even when he was over ninety years old.

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In 1925, he went to Palestine, joining his brother Dovid in the Slabodka Yeshiva in Jerusalem. When the yeshiva moved to Hebron, he stayed in Jerusalem to attend the Mercaz HaRav yeshiva, established by Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook. The yeshiva's teachers were noted scholars, and its students were known for their superior Torah knowledge. Because of my father's outstanding memory and familiarity with a wide array of rabbinic works, Rabbi Kook dubbed him "my bookcase." Father was greatly influenced by Rabbi Kook's holy personality. He told me that hearing Rabbi Kook speak at the Seudah Shlishit in the yeshiva transported one "almost to *Gan Eden*" – the World to Come. He was not alone in his opinion. Scholars from all segments of Jerusalem's perpetually fractured religious community came together regularly to enjoy this Shabbat experience as well.

While my father was in Jerusalem, Rabbi Kook and Rabbis Issur Zalman Meltzer, Yaakov Charlop, Shmuel Rapaport, Moshe Mordechai Epstein, and Abba Yaakov Borochov all granted him *semichah* (rabbinic ordination).



Class photo of Mercaz Harav yeshiva, 1928  
(my father, top row, center, second from right)

In 1929, Rabbi Shimon Shkop left Lithuania and came to New York to teach Talmud at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (now part of Yeshiva University).<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Shimon influenced my father to come to New York in order to help build a stronger foundation of Torah knowledge within the student body of the yeshiva. During that time, my father had a patron, Rabbi Aaron Charney of Bayonne, New Jersey. His wife was a distant relative of my father's and also born and raised in Ratzki. My father spent Shabbat and holidays with the Charneys. I met Rabbi Charney a number of times, finding him to be the absolute prototype of the traditional Lithuanian rabbi. He was a fine orator, an author of rabbinic works, and a most engaging and enlightened personality. (I have known his wonderful family for several generations now, and I treasure our relationship.) My father's other great patron was Rabbi Dr. Bernard Revel, the head of the yeshiva. Father later received *semichah* from him, Rabbi Shkop, and Rabbis Moshe Soloveitchik and Moshe Zev Margolies.

My father arrived in New York on the same boat as Rabbi Dr. Shmuel Belkin. They had something else in common as well. There was a prize of \$500 for outstanding Torah scholarship in the yeshiva, established by Israel Rokeach (of the Rokeach Food Corporation). Both my father and Rabbi Belkin received this prize in 1929. (They remained fast friends for decades.)

Dr. Revel knew my future grandfather, Rabbi Rubinstein, in Chicago, and he knew he had unmarried daughters. Now that my father had won the Rokeach prize – equivalent to a year's salary – Dr. Revel suggested that he go to Chicago and meet the daughters.

That's how my parents met, marrying in 1932. My grandfather arranged for my father to become the rabbi of the Anshei Odessa synagogue on Chicago's Jewish West Side. I was born in 1934, and in 1939 my father became the rabbi of the much larger Beis Medrash Hagadol

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1. Rabbi Shimon told my father that "European Jewry was all played out" and that the future of the Jewish People lay only in America and in the Land of Israel. Yet Rabbi Shkop himself later acceded to the request of the Chofetz Chaim (Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan) and Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzensky and returned to Lithuania to head the yeshiva in Grodno. He left New York with a heavy heart, sensing perhaps that he could have had a greater impact on Jewish life by staying put.



My parents at their 35th wedding anniversary

Bnei Yaakov Anshei Luknik synagogue, a most prestigious position. The synagogue moved a number of times and added the name Kesser Maariv, but my father remained its rabbi.<sup>2</sup>

Father had one sister and four brothers. After studying in yeshiva, Eliezer, his oldest brother, was caught up in the zeitgeist and became a Labor Zionist activist. He moved to the Land of Israel in 1921, paving the streets of Tel Aviv with his bare hands, despite his degrees in education. He later became an expert on bees and the production of honey, serving as a consultant to many honey producers, Jews and Arabs alike. Eliezer married late and lived in Hadera. He swam every morning in the Mediterranean, even in his nineties. In his last decade, he returned to Jewish observance.

The second brother was Rabbi Dovid Wein, a student in the Slabodka Yeshiva. He arrived in the Land of Israel in 1923 with a contingent from the yeshiva, then headed by the *Alter* of Slabodka, Rabbi Nossou Zvi Finkel. The yeshiva was established in Jerusalem, but the young men of Slabodka, with their European dress and relatively worldly

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2. He served as a rabbi in Chicago for over fifty years, retiring only when he came to live with my family in Monsey, New York, in the 1980s.



outlook, were derided by Jerusalem zealots, and Rabbi Finkel prudently moved the yeshiva to Hebron to avoid friction. Sadly, the yeshiva suffered in the deadly 1929 pogrom at the hands of a rioting Arab mob. Uncle Dovid, who survived the pogrom, married and moved to Holon, where he served for a while as a community security guard. He was a great scholar, a clever leader, and a person of nobility, piety, and holiness. Every Elul, he would return to the Slabodka Yeshiva (now back in Jerusalem and renamed the Hebron Yeshiva) to gain spiritual strength for the upcoming Days of Awe. In the 1930s, he became the rabbi of the main synagogue in Holon, serving in that post until his death in 1967. He and his wife, Aunt Rishel (Miletsky), never had children.

My father was the third son in the family. After him came Rabbi Aharon Yehuda Wein. Aharon Yehuda studied in Slabodka and Radin, becoming a formidable scholar and the rabbi of Vidz, a town in Lithuania famed for its outstanding rabbinic leaders over the ages. The Ponivezher Rav, Rabbi Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman, was once rabbi in Vidz, and told me how wonderful Jewish life there had been.

Aharon Yehuda's father-in-law had himself served as rabbi of the town until moving to South Africa. Remaining in Vidz proved tragic for Aharon Yehuda. When the Russians occupied Lithuania in 1940, their murderous commissars (many of them Jewish) killed him and his whole family for being "counter-revolutionaries." He had refused to cooperate with the Russians in destroying local Jewish life. I clearly remember the terrible day that Rabbi Ephraim Oshry,<sup>3</sup> himself a survivor of the horrors of World War II, arrived at our home in Chicago and told my father the awful news. Though I was only eleven, the story made the Holocaust real and personal to me. At that very early age I also became a confirmed anti-Communist. I couldn't conceive of any cause or ideology worthy of the murder of my uncle, aunt, and little cousins.

World War II was a fact of my childhood. I remember hearing on our radio Adolf Hitler's screeching rants and the roar of the crowd listening to him, while my parents paled and wept. I remember the date "which will live in infamy," December 7, 1941, as I returned with my mother

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3. Author of *The Annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry* (New York: Judaica Press, 1995).

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from a movie theater to hear the news that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor. America was at war. I didn't know what that would mean.

I don't recall the war causing me any inconvenience, aside from having to sing patriotic songs at school. But I understood from the adults around me that something terrible was happening to the Jewish People in Europe. I was also greatly concerned about the Jews in the Land of Israel, and childishly dreamed about helping fight the Arabs, the British, and the Germans there.

Food was rationed during the war, but I don't remember our family ever lacking basic necessities. My father's congregants brought us food to help feed our constant guests. As there were no home freezers then, my mother was always cooking. The war became less remote when the son of my grandfather's neighbor lost his life fighting in the Pacific. We shared the family's anguish. Only later did I learn that very close relatives of mine were also killed in the war.

The youngest of my father's brothers was Rabbi Tuvia Wein. He studied in the legendary Chofetz Chaim's yeshiva in Radin in the early 1930s. When my grandfather Berel died suddenly on a visit to Warsaw (sadly, I could not locate his grave in the Jewish cemetery there), my grandmother Esther Chana (Romberg) Wein (a direct descendant of the Vilna Gaon) left the town of Ratzki with her children, my Uncle Tuvia and Aunt Shoshana, and immigrated to the Land of Israel. The former joined Poalei Agudas Yisrael and worked as a laborer before becoming an outstanding teacher in the *Charedi* school system in Ramle and Rechovot. Uncle Tuvia was famed throughout religious Israel as a miniature Chofetz Chaim because of his guarded tongue, Torah scholarship, and piety. He authored *Yayn Hatov*, a series of seminal works on the Targum (the Aramaic exposition of the Bible), and in many respects was the mainstay of the Rechovot religious community.

Uncle Tuviah married Aunt Sarah, and their two daughters, Batya Kurlansky and Shulamit Ginsberg, and their extended families are still very close to our family. Any visit to their home, no matter what time of day or night, included a full meat meal; no excuse, rational explanation, or argument could ever change that custom. Aunt Sarah would command, "Eat!" and you ate. Whenever I visited them in Rechovot, Aunt Sarah

would run downstairs and invite the taxi driver up to have a bite too. Most of those tough Israelis couldn't escape without eating something in her home. My wife once complimented Aunt Sarah on her strudel. From that day on, we always received strudel from her through Israeli visitors to America, and later through guests in our home in Jerusalem. Uncle Tuvia and Aunt Sarah were the kindest, gentlest souls imaginable, and their love for people – all people – and for the Land of Israel was palpable. Visiting them was always a spiritual experience.

My grandmother ultimately lived with her daughter Shoshana in south Tel Aviv, close to the Jaffa border. Aunt Shoshana was a most wondrous person. She was extremely clever, knowledgeable, and industrious, with a great sense of humor. She married Chaim Freed, and they had five children.<sup>4</sup> Born in Vilna, Uncle Chaim was a Torah scholar, but he worked as a toolmaker/mechanic. His workshop provided small arms for the Haganah in the struggle against the British and the Arabs. Aunt Shoshana was the executive secretary of Ponivezh Yeshiva. The Ponivezher Rav told me that “she *was* the yeshiva.” I remember once calling her there to say hello on one of my trips to Israel, and she quickly told me that since the yeshiva was paying her salary, she couldn't talk to me at work, and I should call her at home that night. Those Jews of Ratzki were truly special. They were modest, humble, serene, optimistic, and very perceptive about life and people. They had minimal physical expectations from life and great discipline in behavior, speech, and attitude. They represented the best qualities of Lithuanian Jewry. I always felt humbled in their presence.

My mother's family, the Rubinsteins, came from Buten, a small village near Belarus. The original family name wasn't Rubinstein, but my grandfather took it on to avoid grueling, long-term service in the Russian army. If a family had only one son, he was exempted from military duty; thus, by having different last names, everyone in the family could claim he was an only son. This tactic was common in Russia during the czarist anti-Jewish campaigns of the nineteenth century.

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4. The oldest, my cousin Nechama, is married to the well-known holy *mashgiach* Rabbi Dan Segal.

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In 1884, when my grandfather, Chaim Zvi, was fourteen, he arrived at the famed Etz Chaim Yeshiva in Volozhin, Lithuania/Belarus. He became a devoted disciple of Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (the “Netziv”), the head of the yeshiva, and also studied under his associate, the famed Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik. My grandfather received *semichah* from both of these Torah greats. He once described to me the intensity and the enormous amounts of text studied in the yeshiva, and doubted that such a standard would ever be seen again. One winter semester, from Succot to Pesach, he himself completed studying two difficult Talmudic tractates – Gittin and Kiddushin – in depth and with many commentaries. This in addition to preparing for the daily Talmud lectures. In 1892, the yeshiva was closed by the czarist government with the aid – and probably at the instigation – of the Jewish “*maskilim*” (“enlightened ones”). Rabbi Berlin left Russia for Jerusalem. He took with him a number of devoted students who begged to accompany him, among them my grandfather, who was not yet married.

The group moved on to Warsaw, aiming to reach Turkey and then Palestine. However, Rabbi Berlin suffered a debilitating stroke and died a few months later. On my only visit to Poland, in the 1990s, I visited his grave – Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik is buried next to him – in the Warsaw Jewish cemetery.

My grandfather then married Chaya Sarah Rabinowitz, a young widow with an infant son. (That son was later studying at a yeshiva in Galicia when World War I caught up with him, and he became a victim of its horrors.) Chaya Sarah was a niece of the famed Hasidic master Rabbi Zadok HaKohen Rabinowitz of Pshischa (and later Lublin). Reb Zadok was the only Hasid in the family.

My grandparents continued on to the Land of Israel, settling in Jaffa, where the famed Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook became the rabbi in 1904. He and my grandfather had been friends as students in Volozhin. Rabbi Rubinstein founded a yeshiva called Shaarei Torah, whose building remains a Jaffa landmark. The family eventually moved to Jerusalem, where he served on the rabbinic court headed by Rabbi Shmuel Salant.

In 1911, my grandfather was sent to America to raise funds for Jerusalem charities. In Chicago he encountered immigration difficulties and was threatened with jail and/or deportation. Lacking a rabbi, the Jewish community of South Chicago offered to help him if he stayed on.

This story is reminiscent of the famous “Four Captives” of Babylonia who were ransomed by Jewish communities in Italy, Morocco, and Spain provided that they remain as rabbis in those communities. Never underestimate the powers and tactics of Jews in hiring – or firing – a rabbi.

In any event, my grandfather agreed, bringing over the family from Jerusalem, and that is how I came to be born in Chicago.

My Rubinstein grandparents had six children. The boys were Naftali, Zadok, and Shmuel. The girls were Judith, Esther (my mother), and Rachel.

Naftali was a *shochet*/rabbi/teacher in Aurora, Illinois, near Chicago. His daughter, Bertha Merzon, was my first cousin, and her grandson is my beloved relative Gary Torgow, a lay leader of American Orthodoxy.

Zadok was a rabbi in Milwaukee and later in Ventura, California, while Shmuel worked as a car dealer in Chicago.

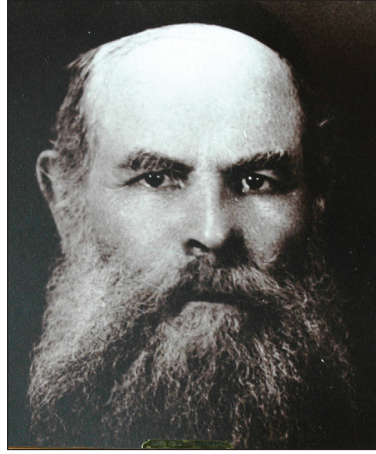
Rachel married Rabbi Jacob Schochet, a student from the Slabodka Yeshiva and a Hebrew teacher in Chicago. Their only child, my closest cousin, Rabbi Elijah Judah Schochet, was a rabbi in Los Angeles for forty years until his retirement. We are the same age and were classmates in elementary school until the Schochets left for California in 1947. Our families are still close. The Schochets are related to the late, great Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky and his descendants.

Judith married Moshe Silverman, another former Slabodka student and a teacher in Chicago’s Marks Nathan Jewish Orphan Home. After my grandfather was widowed in 1935, the Silvermans moved in with him (at 3315 Douglas Boulevard) until they left for Los Angeles in 1950.

Very few of my peers had living grandparents. My mother’s father was the only grandparent I knew: As noted, my paternal grandfather passed away before I was born (and I am named after him); my maternal grandmother died while I was still an infant; and my paternal grandmother lived in Tel Aviv, so I never saw her.

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In 1919, Grandfather Rubinstein founded Beis Medrash L'Torah/ Hebrew Theological College with three students, who learned and lived in his home. The yeshiva was incorporated in 1921, with Rabbi Saul Silber as president and Rabbi Nissan Yablonsky, a famed Slabodka Torah scholar, as *rosh yeshiva*. My grandfather taught the second-highest level.



R. Chaim Zvi Halevi Rubinstein

I knew Grandfather from my infancy until his death, when I was ten. I studied Torah with him, joined in his Pesach *Sedarim*, and sat on his lap on Simchat Torah afternoon, when his students came to his home to sing and eat and discuss Torah. He brought me into the yeshiva's late afternoon class at age nine to begin intensive study. He was the light of my life – always smiling and gentle; happy when I answered his Torah questions correctly and forgiving when I did not.

Aside from his Torah scholarship, Grandfather was known in Chicago for his generosity and piety. He never locked his door. Any itinerant Jew, especially the poor and the traveling fundraisers, knew he had a place in the Rubinstein home.

Grandfather was the rabbi of Bnei Reuven Synagogue, then located on Kedvale Avenue in Chicago's West Side Lawndale neighborhood and only loosely affiliated with the Lubavitch movement. Though my grandfather was not a Hasid, he had a relationship with Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, the sixth Rebbe of Lubavitch.

During the Second World War, when my Aunt Judith contracted with a painter to paint his house before Pesach, my grandfather paid him but wouldn't let him do the job. He told my aunt, "While Jews are being killed in Europe, I will not allow myself the pleasure of having my house repainted."

Grandfather had a wonderful sense of humor. An inveterate cigar and pipe-smoker, he once gave a student of his five cents to "please go buy

a cigar” for him. The student wanted to honor his teacher, so he bought a twenty-five-cent cigar. After one puff, my grandfather immediately noticed the better quality of the cigar. With a characteristic twinkle in his eye, he called over the student and said: “Here’s a dime. Please buy two more of these cigars for me.” Decades later, this story was still part of the yeshiva’s folklore.

The yeshiva catalogue listed my grandfather as a “senior professor of Talmud.” The head of the Jewish studies program at that time was the famed Dr. Meyer Waxman, a great Judaic scholar and author of many books on Jewish literature, history, and other subjects. When shown the catalogue, my grandfather looked at his title and remarked wryly: “If I’m already a senior professor, then what greater title can be given to Dr. Waxman?”

In his later years, Grandfather suffered from cataracts in both his eyes, but he continued to teach Talmud daily, practically from memory. He finally had an operation. (In those days, it was major surgery, requiring weeks of hospitalization.) I remember riding home from the hospital with him. How excitedly he read every street sign and billboard! He marveled at how eyesight was a gift of God. And so it is.

My grandfather also possessed a very melodic voice and served as the cantor every year for the Yom Kippur *Neilah* service. I inherited no such musical talent, as you will discover later in this book.

When Grandfather passed away in October 1944, an enormous crowd of mourners, many of them non-Jews, accompanied him to his final resting place in Chicago’s Waldheim Cemetery. My mother and aunts discovered that he owned a life insurance policy worth \$10,000, a very princely sum in those days. I remember their discussing how this money would ensure a college education for my cousins and me. They soon discovered, however, that he had assigned the entire policy to the Vaad ha-Hatzala – an organization dedicated to saving as many Jews as possible from the Holocaust.

No one was surprised. It seemed perfectly fitting for him. I remember when he once came home and announced to my mother and aunt, “I left this morning to go to *shul* without taking any money with me. On the way home just now, a stranger approached me and gave me five dollars. Then he disappeared. I was bewildered by the incident.

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Two blocks later, a poor man approached me and begged for money to buy food. I gave him the five dollars. I then knew why Heaven had sent me the five dollars.”

I am so grateful to have had my grandfather in my life. He has remained my inspiration, role model, and hero. In difficult moments, faced with major problems in my professional and personal life, I have always asked myself: “What would my grandfather have said or done?” And then I’ve known what to do.

Naturally, my parents were the greatest influence of my youth. Every day, after coming home from public school at 3:15 pm, I would study Torah with my father. By age nine, I was already somewhat proficient in Talmud and even in its commentaries. If I grossly misbehaved at home, my punishment was that he would not teach me that day. It was a fearsome penalty, for I loved studying with him from his old copy of the Talmud, printed on green and blue paper. (Unable to afford the classic Vilna Talmud, he was content with this inexpensive edition.) Those tinted pages remain before my eyes every time I open any volume of the Talmud, even now in my old age.

I briefly attended the Moses Montefiore Talmud Torah, an after-school program that included relatively high-level study of Mishnah and Talmud. But I was unhappy there: The teacher was a fine Jew but a terrible pedagogue, wielding a cane to maintain discipline. My father and I decided to continue our private study sessions instead.

When I was nine, my grandfather enrolled me in the afternoon preparatory division of Beis Medrash L’Torah, where I studied under Rabbi Nachman Barr, Rabbi Mordechai Schultz, and then Rabbi David Silver, who was a profound influence in my life. In later years, I was friendly with generations of Rabbi Silver’s descendants and visited him when I moved to Jerusalem, where he then also lived. He was a master teacher and a very kind and generous pedagogue. He protected me – a short, fat kid, something of a nerd, and younger than everyone else in the class – from bullying.

I also attended Victor F. Lawson Public School in Chicago. The student body was 98 percent Jewish, but the faculty was composed mainly of grim, exacting Irish teachers who drilled us mercilessly in the





The original building of Beis Medrash L'Torah/Hebrew Theological College,  
built in 1921 in Chicago

three R's. I was an avid reader from my earliest years, and my mother took me to the public library every week. I completed six grades in four years.

We all had to sing Christmas carols in school, but my mother immunized me early on against these influences. Moreover, because my tone-deaf “singing” threw off the other students, I was ordered not to sing. And I complied, thus beginning my lifelong musical silence.

Though the school was almost all Jewish, we Jews endured bullying and verbal abuse from the few non-Jews. They continually shouted at us: “Go back to Palestine!” In my youth, I was a Palestinian.

There were close to a hundred Jewish boys of my approximate age living on my block, but I was the only Sabbath observer. My mother drilled into me the notion that I was special, that my observance was correct, and that everyone else was sadly mistaken. Only three or four boys attended Shabbat services with their fathers, though seven hundred and fifty men prayed in that *shul*. Almost all of them had already “lost” their children and grandchildren to American assimilation.

But we all played together, and every year we went to the Chicago Cubs baseball game on Chol Hamoed Pesach. No matter how non-observant they may have been, all Jewish children back then ate matzo on Pesach. So at the ball game Wrigley Field sounded like it was being consumed by termites. Even the ball players heard the crunching in the stands.

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In 1946, when I finished sixth grade, my parents wanted to transfer me to a new institution created by the Orthodox community: the Chicago Jewish Academy. Certain Orthodox Jews tried to dissuade them. I remember one such telling my mother, “You’ll make him a cripple!” She coolly replied, “But he’ll be a *Jewish* cripple.”

The Academy began as a junior high and eventually encompassed seventh through twelfth grades. The Jewish studies – mainly Talmud, but also Tanach and Hebrew – were taught in the morning, with secular studies from 1:30 till 5 pm. On Fridays, there were no secular studies. No school on Sundays either. The education was superb, and classes were coed. (A number of girls who grew up to be well-known Hasidic *rebbitzens* and other noted women were my classmates. But this is my biography, not theirs, so I won’t reveal their names.)

By the time I reached eighth grade, I was attending yeshiva in the morning and the Academy only in the afternoon. My yeshiva teacher was Rabbi Herzl Kaplan, a product of the Slabodka Yeshiva, a great scholar, and a Renaissance man who knew everything about everything. He taught not only Talmud, but also Tanach, and I completed the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel under him. The system in the yeshiva was that one stayed with the same teacher for at least two years; that way, we benefited from each teacher in a cumulative fashion.

I loved all my yeshiva teachers, and I always felt they loved me as well. But the Talmud teaches us that it takes forty years to truly appreciate a teacher, and so it is. Looking back, I realize their enormous worth and influence.

On *Parshat Shmini* 5707/1947 I became a *bar mitzvah*. Since my father was the rabbi of a large synagogue, it was a major community event. As mentioned, I couldn’t carry a tune even in a paper bag. Nevertheless, Rabbi Silver’s father was an outstanding Torah reader (as was his son), and he taught me to read the *Haftorah* from the synagogue’s *navi* parchment scroll. My chanting was terrible, but I read all the words perfectly. My *dvar Torah*, which I delivered in Yiddish before a packed congregation, was written for me by Rabbi Kaplan, and it covered a complicated subject in Baba Metzia. I understood what I was saying, and I felt that my *dvar Torah* compensated for my monotonic rendition of the *Haftorah*. A gala Shabbat meal was catered for my *bar mitzvah* in

the yeshiva building across the street from my father's *shul*, and there I delivered a speech in English to mark the occasion.

At thirteen, I was confident and had acquired a bit of a reputation as a public speaker. I had spoken publicly a number of times previously, once before a crowd of thousands who came to hear Cantor Pierre Pinchik conduct *Selichot* services in a very large Chicago synagogue. From then on, I was always somewhat excited about speaking publicly, but never fearful. This skill has stood me in good stead throughout my rabbinic career.

Because I was already in high school when my Bar Mitzvah occurred, it effectively ended my childhood. I felt solemnly prepared to embark on my adolescence and a serious career as a yeshiva student.