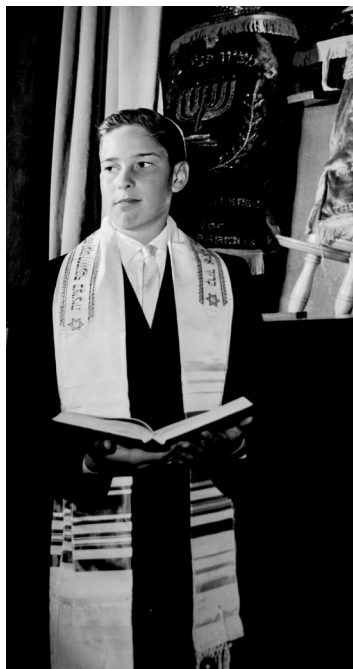


# Serendipity & Me

Ric Wasserman

our small Jewish community in Franklin Square – attend the synagogue’s afternoon Hebrew school for three years until we were 13 and ready for our bar and bat mitzvahs.



*Ric Bar-Mitzvah (Photo: Martin H. Lobell)*

It was, and still is a mystery to me, why during our three-year, after-school preparation for bar mitzvah, all those hours spent learning Hebrew was never intended to teach us the language in any proper way. We were taught history and the meaning of the major Jewish cultural events, but never to read or write in Hebrew. It was clear that the only goal was for us to be able to memorize certain prayers such as the Haftorah, and mainly, the particular passage in the Torah we’d be reading at our bar-mitzvah in front of family, friends, and relatives, as well as the entire congre-

gation. When I try to remember anything in Hebrew today, the only phrase I recall is the teacher shouting "*sheket bavakasha*" which translates to, "Quiet down, children!"

## CHAPTER 4

# I'm Jewish and Deal with it

Being Jewish often meant danger throughout highschool. I was swimming in a turbulent sea of rough Irish and Italian youths and it sometimes felt like being in a shark tank. I was regularly threatened by Catholic bullies and other tough guys with slicked back hair and tight jeans whom we called "hoods". They hung out in the corridors at school combing their greased-back hair and shooting people mean looks. I avoided them and their stares. But it was outside school that they'd suddenly appear, cornering me.

"You killed Christ," they'd say, before beating me up on several occasions on my way home from school. Christ was certainly hanging limp on a cross, but what did that have to do with me? I tried to reason with them as their blows rained down on me. When I came home once with a fat lip, ripped pants, and bleeding knees, my father shrugged, sighed, and said it was something I had to expect. He'd had to deal with it, and so would I. It felt like a kind of rite of passage, from one generation to the next. Something I grudgingly had to accept. I was too small to fight the bullies off, as there were usually at least two brutes waiting in ambush. When alone, I often dreaded the walk home from junior high school. So, I watched my back when I could. It was a part of life, and my other Jewish friends were also made to offer some blood now and then for the death of Christ.

I sometimes think about my ambivalence to religion in

general, and the Jewish one I was raised in, in particular. It is my religion by birth, something I can't escape. Nor do I want to. But the religion itself never held any real importance for me spiritually, except to remind me of being part of a group, different than the outsiders, or as Jews liked to call them 'gentiles' or 'goyim.' Growing up, I viewed being Jewish as a rather time-consuming encumbrance, leading to a ceremonial obligation to be gotten over with, namely, my bar mitzvah.

In my family we never practiced the Friday Sabbath ritual, nor did we fast at Yom Kippur. My family attended services only during the 'high holy days,' Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. We had a one-night family seder at Passover. And at Chanukkah we often had relatives over for dinner, amusing ourselves by playing ancient games like spinning the dreidel and giving gifts, the small children yelling while looking for the afikomen, the half piece of matzoh that was hidden somewhere. These are fond memories, but nothing I will miss and long for again. It mostly felt like empty ritual.

Why didn't I pass on my knowledge of Judaism's rich, five-thousand-year-old history, with its many traditions and customs to my children? This can likely be related to two things. One: that I didn't feel it meant anything to me, so why should I think it would mean anything to them? I need to be inspired to inspire others. I wasn't. Was I selfish? Lazy? Should I have extended to them the Jewish traditions they should be able to pass on to their children as well? Had I broken a vital chain by my indifference? I hope my children can understand why I haven't done my 'job' of imparting Jewish culture and history. I tell myself that it's not my responsibility as a Jewish man, as some might feel. I know my mother was disappointed that I was a 'chain breaker.' I'm sure she felt it was a betrayal.

That I had broken some kind of unwritten law requiring me to teach my children what I had learned from my parents, and they from theirs, *ad infinitum*.

The other thing affecting my choice is the fact that after moving to Sweden, I felt myself an oddity in an entire country of Lutheran Christians. I knew no one in Stockholm who was Jewish, nor did I feel the need to seek them out, to bond with my brethren. There were other factors as well thrown into the mix. I became politicized by my wife Britta and others and came to see the Palestinian struggle for justice for what it is. That Israel is Goliath and the Palestinians are David. Yes, I know I shouldn't mix the Jewish religion and culture with the Jewish political state and its apartheid policies and creation of Bantustans for Palestinians. But I'm deeply ashamed of the terror, the unconscionable brutalization and ongoing suffering wrought by Israel for over 70 years in the occupied territories.

A promise I will keep is never to set foot in Israel. I don't want to have to be in a country that is such an overt oppressor or be a visitor in a state that actively practices apartheid. I don't want to put myself in a situation where my religious loyalty is tested. It may also be, on some plane, that I subconsciously didn't want my children to associate themselves with being Jewish or be bound by the link of my Jewishness. Could that be why I've consciously, or unconsciously done my part to stop the passage of knowledge to further generations? In addition, as opposed to the thousands of people whose families in Europe were – and still are – suffering from the effects of the Holocaust, no one I met in the US, or any of my relatives were affected. I've never experienced any kind of emotional attachment that would help connect me with Israel; with the land that felt it had the right to brutally displace the inhabitants from their traditional territory in order to

create a new country, basically foremost for Jews alone.

If my children had been interested at any point in my imparting the Jewish traditions, I'd have told them. If my grandchildren ask, I'll tell them what I know, although this, by the way, is no more than anyone can read on Wikipedia nowadays. So far, they haven't asked. However, it may just boil down to this: I'm glad for the accomplishments of the many Jewish persons now and throughout history that are great thinkers and excel in many fields. But I'm personally not proud of being Jewish.

I know that the state of Israel should not be confused with its individuals, thousands of whom are firmly against the state policies and are good people. I abhor injustice, and this is what I see and feel every time the issue arises. My wife Britta made a tour of several Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon in 2019, where she had worked 40 years before. The camps have more than doubled in size, and the situation for the inhabitants is deplorable, with no hope for improvement in sight. Imagine generations growing up with no citizenship at all, which is the case for Palestinians in Lebanon. They cannot work or go to school there. Because they don't belong there; forced out of the so-called "promised land." I don't like to dwell on the subject, much less talk or write about it. It stirs up a lot of rage. So, nuff said. There is, though, one job that I took on later in life, which firmly involves my being Jewish. In fact, I couldn't have done it if I wasn't. I look on that project and recall with a certain pride that I played a positive role.

In February of 1994 I got a call from Suzanne Kaplan, a Stockholm psychiatrist. She knew I was a filmmaker and that I, like herself, was Jewish. "Would you like to work with me," she asked, "on Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation project?" I asked her to explain. "The goal is

to record as many holocaust survivors living in Sweden as we can," she said. "We'll have to move quickly as there aren't many left. I'll be using a strict questionnaire where the people we interview will reach back as far as they can remember from their childhoods, their lives, their experiences during the holocaust, and continue up to today. I'll use a protocol and visit them first to do a preliminary test to see which of them can recall well enough for us to make a video recording." We would do 36 interviews, often with married couples who had both survived, some through luck, some through their wits, some by being freed by Allied troops. Most were in their mid-80s.

This particular job was unlike anything I'd done before, or have since, and it began with the knock on the door and the people who answered. I felt transported back to my youth, instantly feeling just like I did when I came to visit my relatives as a boy. The warm welcome, and the common denominator that is being Jewish that pervaded the atmosphere surrounded me entirely; enveloping me in a way that made me feel these people could have been my relatives. As in a way, they were. Many of the stories we heard were so brutal in their detail that I hung my head and closed my eyes, forcing back tears. I should have been focused, concentrated, looking through the camera, but I could not. Several times I needed to pause, as did those being interviewed. It was exhausting for Suzanne, for me, and for the survivors.

The most important aspect of this project was that it permanently documented the life stories of holocaust survivors for posterity. Spielberg's goal was to record 50,000 interviews, which was accomplished in three years. There are now over 112,000 hours of testimony, done in 63 countries and in 41 languages. The Shoah Digital Archive located in Los Angeles allows students, teachers and re-