

Excerpt from "Diary of a Los Angeles Jew, 1947-1973"

By: Marc Lee Raphael

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"the best teacher I ever had."

When Confirmation was over, Rabbi Lewis suggested that I continue my Jewish education at the College of Jewish Studies, a city-wide, evening adult education program partially filled with students, of all ages, from Reform synagogues. Some were working towards Certification as religious school educators, some were laymen and laywomen who simply wanted to learn, and some, like myself, were unofficial pre-rabbinic students. Thanks to a scholarship from Rabbi Lewis, I took one course each semester during the 11th and 12th grades at Wilshire Boulevard Temple and at 590 Vermont Ave. (the Bureau of Jewish Education) and I received some credit later at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion for these courses.

In one course we read Mordecai M. Kaplan's *Judaism as a Civilization*, and this was my first serious introduction to what would become a life-long interest, American Judaism. My copy of this book is marked throughout with my marginalia, as I see, with 50 years of hindsight, that I was already interested in questions about the synagogue and the various branches of American Judaism. I know that I thought Kaplan even more brilliant than Milton Steinberg, my first intellectual hero, and, like so many before me, I have found stimulation for teaching and for lectures from this book throughout my career.

But it was a course in a section of the Mishnah, *Pirkei Avot*, (*Ethics of the Talmud*), that stimulated me more than any course I had ever taken, anywhere, and which would plant the idea in my mind that I might not only be a rabbi but a professor. I had never read any part of the Mishnah, as it was not likely that this mostly legal text (the first "code" of Jewish law after the Hebrew Bible) would be part of the curriculum of a Reform congregation in the 1950s. But this section of Mishnah has no legal material, just a series of marvelous proverbs or sayings attributed to teachers and rabbis of the first century bce and the first two centuries ce.

Our text, edited by R. Travers Herford, was in both Hebrew (Mishnaic Hebrew is very simple) and English. The abundant commentary to each saying was mostly technical, as Herford had little insight into the text. But my teacher, Sam Kaminker (1914-1964), Director of Education for the Western Region of the Reform movement, was incredible. Number one, he was my first teacher who brought a world of *yiddishkeit*, unknown to me, to the classroom. My parents knew no Yiddish and I knew no Yiddish, but soon I knew how to use Yiddish insults in the original. My three favorite (translated) remain:

May you grow like an onion, with your head in the ground.

May your bones be broken as often as the 10 Commandments.

And, may the souls of all or King Solomon's mothers-in-law inhabit you.

Second, he was brilliant. He was one of those rare teachers who could ask important questions of a text that I could not answer, no matter how carefully I had prepared the text, questions that illuminated the text in special ways. Third, he was a tremendous source of bibliography. I see that I wrote down in my text title after title that he recommended, and read as many as I could, especially during the summer. I have never forgotten how much this meant to me, and have tried my best throughout my career to constantly suggest supplemental texts to those I am teaching. Whenever someone writes down a title I put on the board I inevitably think back to my jotting down (he titles Mr. Kaminker would toss out to the class. Fourth, he was a constant source of proverbial sayings, pithy reflections on life that I would jot down and

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continue to use for decades. Among those I recorded were "Learn from the mistakes of others; you cannot live long enough to make them all yourself." "The smallest deed is greater than the grandest intention." And "one of the hardest secrets for a person to keep is their opinion of themselves." Fifth, his commentary to the text (which I scribbled everywhere in my Mishnah and which is still a companion for me) taught me more about Jews and Judaism, as well as living an ethical life, than any teacher before or since. Whatever I am as a rabbi and a professor is due in large part to the hundreds of witty, intelligent, and important lessons this extraordinary teacher taught me.

I will relate three of them, as my diaries are filled with passages from the *Ethics of the Talmud* and the commentaries of Mr. Kaminker. He spent two full sessions of the class on the very first sentence of the hook: "Moses received the Torah from Sinai and delivered it to Joshua, and Joshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets delivered it to the Men of the Great Synagogue." He was the first teacher to introduce me to the concept of what he called the "Dual Torah," what others generally refer to as Oral Torah. I had no idea before this class that traditional Jews actually believe there were two revelations: the one at MT. Sinai I knew well in Exodus 19, and another, unrecorded, private revelation from God to Moses. I had no idea that what we were studying in the Mishnah (and the Talmud as well, he explained, though the text itself was unknown to me) was part of this revelation, that the ancient rabbis (as well as many Jews) believed that the Mishnah and Talmud (and much else) had their origin at Sinai. Even more startling to me was the affirmation, according to Mr. Kaminker, that one could not really read and understand the written half of the Dual Torah (the Pentateuch) without the interpretation of the Oral Torah, without the Men of the Great Synagogue, or, simply, the rabbis who are cited in the Mishnah and Talmud! And after several decades of trying to teach puzzled undergraduate students about the Dual Torah, I can easily recall why I found this so amazing.

We devoted an entire evening to three Hebrew words in 1:6, "Get a friend." It is now as yesterday as I recall his comments on friendship, on the need to find a friend who will argue with you, someone who will constantly push you to be a better person. And he noted that the word for "friend" is also the word for "rabbi" or "teacher," and that the best teacher is the one who will engage the student in dialogue, seeking to challenge their thinking in every area. But what I most remember, and what I have thought about constant over the past five decades, is his insistence that a friend must have "depth." By using this word he meant that one's friends should not only be able to discuss human morality, but that in some way they are able to act on one's own morality. Like the best characters in Henry James, who is not only about to describe human morality in action, but who creates characters (and narrators) who reach out and act on the moralities of his readers. If one chooses well, he or she will be profitably changed.

Finally, Mr. Kaminker talked longest about a remarkable passage (3:19): "All is foreseen, and free will is given." He had us memorize these four Hebrew words (as he did with every interesting passage in *Ethics of the Talmud*), and I have used them as an illustration in the classroom and from the pulpit nearly as many times as I have used, at bar and bat mitzvahs, the statistic of the number of possible bridge hands. For him, it was a classic cop-out. If God knows what we will do (his favorite example was whether he would move forward or backward while standing before the class of students), then of course Mr. Kaminker does not have free will to decide in which direction he will move. And if God does not know which direction someone will move, thus preserving our freedom to decide, what *does* God know? It was of course a dilemma I would encounter in studying Jewish texts over and over.