

## Into the Real World: The Military and Civilian Rabbinite, 1962–1967

---

The chaplaincy was an obligation that I was certain I would fulfill after I had completed my undergraduate and graduate/seminary years of study. It was a commitment to serve that had long been delayed. So, after my ordination in May 1962, I volunteered for the US Air Force chaplaincy. That summer, I attended chaplaincy school at Lackland Air Force Base outside of San Antonio, Texas. (I had chosen the Air Force because I was told that it offered the best possibility of being assigned an overseas post. What constituted an overseas post turned out not to be what I expected.) For two months at Lackland, we—a class of about forty clergy made up of Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and one adherent of Christian Science—learned about military etiquette: how to march and what to do in difficult counseling situations.

Since we were in Texas in the middle of the summer, when the temperature often reached more than 100 degrees Fahrenheit, the hours scheduled for marching were usually canceled, and as a result we spent most of our mornings in the officers' club. One of the most important military lessons one needed to learn in the classroom sessions was that everything had to be done by the number. One of my fellow rabbis, who was Orthodox, had his own universal way of dealing with any problem. When asked how to solve a perplexing problem, he always came up with the same answer: *sug Tehillim* ("recite Psalms").

Halfway through the course, we were given a weekend off, and three of my Jewish chaplain colleagues and I drove to the border town of Laredo, Texas, where we decided to cross into Mexico at the Mexican town of Nuevo Laredo. Walking through the market place, we could not avoid the signs—in English—that were plastered on every wall and forbade the taking of any photographs. One of my companions, Walter Zanger, who was the only one of us who had brought a camera, paid no attention to the signs and took

countless photos of the various shops and the old men and women selling trinkets to the tourists. Suddenly, a police van drove up and two officers jumped out, demanding the film from Walter's camera. When Walter refused to give it to them, they arrested all four of us and drove us to the police station.

There we encountered the chief of police, who took Walter's camera and the film, declaring that since we had broken the law, we would be held until the next day to appear before a judge for sentencing. Of course, we protested, insisting on making a phone call to Lackland Air Force base. The chief denied us the call and then began to interrogate us. During the interrogation process, Walter refused to answer any questions and generally gave the chief a hard time. Finally, we convinced the chief to let us call Lackland, and after about three hours an Air Force NCO showed up and explained that it was all a mistake and that we had never intended to break the law. Subsequently, the chief of police received a phone call, after which he turned to three of us and said, "You can come back." Turning to Walter, however, he said, "If you come back, I will shoot you."

We left Mexico and returned to Lackland. Later, we found out that the incident had gone all the way up the line to the US ambassador to Mexico, who had called his opposite number in Washington, DC. The Mexican ambassador, in turn, had someone in his office call the chief of police, which resulted in our release. As it turned out, the chief of police of Nuevo Laredo had a history of arresting American servicemen and threatening to jail them or even worse. Two weeks later, we heard on the radio that he had arrested an American officer and, in the process, shot and killed him.

The experience of chaplaincy school was overall quite rewarding, and I spent many an evening with fellow clergy of diverse faiths in deep conversation about various theological issues. The only negative experience turned out to be a welcome one for me personally. Each morning, one of the officers in charge would inspect our barracks, and he would give demerits for various infringements of military etiquette. At the end of the two months, the chaplain candidate who had the fewest demerits would be chosen as the officer in charge of his platoon, and he would also be given the honor of leading the platoon in the final graduation ceremonial march. Up until the last few days of the course, I had the fewest demerits of anyone in my barracks and thus was scheduled to lead the platoon in the closing ceremonial march. I was not looking forward to it. But the officer in charge of giving out demerits was a

close friend of one of the chaplain candidates, and he made no secret that he wanted his friend to lead the platoon. Thus, on the last day, he picked up my shoes, which I had spit-polished as required, and rubbed some dirt over them. Then he gave me several demerits. Although I didn't appreciate being given unwarranted demerits, I was nonetheless relieved not to have the responsibility of leading the final ceremonial march, because I always had problems with several of the marching commands.

Upon graduation, we were all promoted from the rank of second lieutenant to first lieutenant and were given our assignments. During our two months of training, we had received a stipend for purchasing uniforms and were directed to civilian tailors who would fit us with uniform fabrics that were appropriate to the prevailing climate of the base to which we were assigned. I had been told that I was most likely going to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines, and thus I was fitted with tropical-weight uniforms. But, as I was about to leave Lackland, I was informed that the Orthodox rabbi who had been assigned to Elmendorf Air Force base outside of Anchorage, Alaska, had—at the request of the commanding officer of the Alaskan Air Command—been reassigned. Apparently, since the Jewish chaplain in Alaska was responsible for *all* Jewish military personnel throughout the state, including those at Air Force, Army, and Navy bases, and since an Orthodox rabbi was forbidden by his faith to travel on the Sabbath or on Jewish holidays, only a Reform rabbi would be able to meet these travel requirements. So, because I was the next Reform rabbi on the chaplaincy list, I was assigned to the Alaskan Air Command.

To get to Alaska, I decided to purchase a red Volkswagen Beetle and drive to Seattle, where I could send my car by boat to Anchorage, and I would take a plane from Seattle to Anchorage. I took the scenic route from the state of Texas to the state of Washington. I had never been in that part of the country, so I visited Meteor Crater, the Petrified Forest, and the Grand Canyon in Arizona and then drove north to Nevada and Las Vegas. From there, I continued to San Jose, California, where I stayed for a short time with my Uncle Joe (Rabbi Joseph Gitin) and Aunt Rosalie, and I became reacquainted with my cousins David and Judi Gitin. Arriving in Seattle, I took advantage of the time before my flight to Anchorage to enjoy the World's Fair.

Upon reaching Anchorage and Elmendorf Air Force Base, where I was to be billeted, I immediately understood why the Air Force issued different uniforms depending on the climate that prevailed where the base was located. In short, I needed different clothing. Since I had already used up my clothing

stipend, I applied for an American Express Card to help cover the additional expense. Unfortunately, I had to dip into my savings instead, because, though I was an officer and a gentleman by act of Congress and was required to dress like one, my salary was insufficient to warrant my obtaining an American Express Card.

### An Alaskan Challenge

Alaska was a unique and challenging experience. Besides leading the Sabbath and holiday services in Anchorage, I reorganized the religious school classes on Sunday mornings to include both the children of military personnel and those from the local community, and I established an adult education program for both communities and a teenage youth group, the Alaskan Federation of Temple Youth. Since there was a sizable Jewish civilian community in Anchorage, I helped to create plans to build a temple and initiated a fundraising campaign that eventually had enough funds for its construction. Part of that campaign included an appeal through the Reform movement's youth program newsletter. I also taught courses in modern Hebrew and biblical archaeology for both the military and civilian Jewish communities.

In preparing for the course in biblical archaeology, I found that there were different opinions on the earliest period that camels were used as a means of transporting goods in the Southern Levant. In looking for a resolution to this issue, I considered turning to the doyen of the archaeology of ancient Israel, William Foxwell Albright. There was no one better than Albright to provide me with an answer, *and* he had written on this subject. As director of the American Schools of Oriental Research in Jerusalem<sup>1</sup> throughout the 1920s and the mid-1930s, Albright had forged the new agenda for biblical studies by creating the discipline of biblical archaeology. This agenda was based on his understanding that for the Bible to be understood, it had to be seen within its historical *Sitz im Leben*—that is, within the larger context of Ancient Near Eastern culture as determined by archaeological discovery and the tradition of comparative philology.

Albright was drawn to archaeology with the firm conviction that biblical studies needed to develop beyond the dead end it had reached in the 1920s, when the dry and tedious nineteenth-century Wellhausen school of textual criticism had seemingly exhausted itself. For Albright the biblical text was not, as the Wellhausen school claimed, merely the reflection of the historical world of those who wrote the text. If that were true, nothing could be known

of early Israelite history and religion. On this basis Albright taught the next generation of archaeologists and biblical historians, such as my teacher Nelson Glueck, G. Ernest Wright, Frank Moore Cross of Harvard University, and David Noel Freedman of the University of Michigan, among others.

There was no doubt that W. F. Albright was the right person for me to approach, and as I understood from a lecture he gave on biblical archaeology during my last year in Cincinnati, he was open to discussing his scholarship with students. I wrote him to ask what he thought about those who had published views different from his own.<sup>2</sup> His typed response, along with a number of superimposed corrections, included an explanation of his earlier dating of the use of the camel to the second millennium. It was a letter that I have cherished and have shared with the historical archives of HUC–JIR in Cincinnati.

Besides biblical archaeology, I taught biblical Hebrew grammar in a linguistics course at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. While in Fairbanks, I also organized the first religious school for the children of both the military and local civilian communities. To facilitate communication between members of both of those communities throughout the state, my boss, a Protestant chaplain with the rank of full-bird colonel, was most supportive. He helped me secure funds from both the Air Force and the Army to establish the *Alaskan Jewish Chronicle*, which I compiled and edited, and which was distributed to Jewish personnel throughout Alaska.

### Unusual Experiences

During my two years in Alaska, I had several unusual experiences. The first occurred only two-and-a-half months after I arrived. In October 1962, most of the personnel at Elmendorf Air Force base were evacuated because of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Because it was a base for U-2s, the Strategic Air Command (SAC), and a center for communications between Asia and the United States, Elmendorf had a high-priority military status. The evacuation of personnel at the base, however, lasted only a few days, even though the crisis went on for about two weeks. We were set up at an outdoor military support base near Fairbanks, where the temperature was well below zero. Housing consisted of makeshift temporary huts, and the latrines were in tents. The primary function of the chaplains in such an emergency consisted of maintaining morale, holding daily services, and distributing wine for various ceremonies. Since the latrines were the largest heated facilities, it was

there that I held daily “meetings,” during which the major activity was wine distribution.

Soon after the Cuban Missile Crisis, I attended my first monthly chaplains’ meeting, a meeting in which we were joined by senior line officers and were asked to address the issue of what literature, especially magazines, should be sold at the base exchange. Since the family members of military personnel, including children, also frequented this facility, the main discussion focused on *Playboy* magazine. A vote was taken to decide the issue, and the majority voted against having *Playboy* on the shelves of the base exchange, though the chaplains, it should be noted, were in favor of keeping it.

It was also early in my tour of duty at Elmendorf that I had a very odd experience involving my secretary, who was responsible for taking care of correspondence and contact with hundreds of Jewish personnel scattered throughout the state. This entailed a great deal of correspondence, including letters to the families and the rabbis of military personnel in the lower forty-eight, and mostly dealt with issues of marriage and divorce and of food and dress for Orthodox personnel. After about three months I received a letter from a rabbi in Seattle, asking me whether I had converted to Christianity. Unbeknownst to me, my secretary, a civilian employee who lived in Anchorage and who had worked for a few Protestant chaplains but never for a Jewish chaplain, was adding the phrase “Yours in Christ” at the end of all my letters after I had signed them. Even after I had explained to my secretary why it was not correct to sign “Yours in Christ” to letters by Jewish chaplains, I subsequently sealed and posted all my letters personally.

Other somewhat unusual experiences included a request from a young airman stationed at a small base outside of Fairbanks to help him prepare for the bar mitzvah he had never had. Since he couldn’t leave his base, I arranged to go over the *haftorah* portion with him by radio. This I did for a couple of weeks, until he was unexpectedly reassigned to a stateside base, where he could finish his preparation with a civilian rabbi. Soon afterward, I was confronted with two cases involving the interplay between military practice and rabbinic ritual, and between civilian law and rabbinic law. The first came to my attention when I was approached by an airman who was an Orthodox Jew. He had been ordered by his immediate superior officer to follow military practice and remove his head covering when he was inside the building in which he worked. The airman had no problem removing his Air Force cap but would not remove his *kippah* (skullcap). The airman’s superior officer did not readily accept my explanation of the religious practice that required the

airman to keep his head covered at all times. To convince him, I was forced to resort to intervention from a higher source, both military and religious, which eventually produced the desired response.

The case in which civilian and rabbinic law came into play was more complicated: it involved finalizing the divorce of an Orthodox Jewish airman and his Moroccan wife. It all started with a phone call from a civilian rabbi in the lower forty-eight who asked me to help an airman stationed at Elmendorf Air Force base to execute the delivery of a *get* (a Jewish bill of divorce) to his wife, who lived in Morocco. According to Jewish law, the husband is supposed to present the *get* to his wife at a *beth din*, a Jewish rabbinic court, in front of witnesses. However, if circumstances prevent this, the husband could appoint someone to act on his behalf and take the bill of divorce to his wife. By Jewish law, the designation of such an agent is complicated and usually requires that it be done at a *beth din*. However, there was no such Jewish court in all of Alaska, and the airman, who had brought the *get* with him when he was reassigned to Alaska, was not able to deliver it himself. Nor did he have an agent with whom to send the *get* to his wife. This was the predicament I was asked to solve.

After discussing the issue with an Orthodox colleague in Seattle and with a military lawyer, I decided that, due to the unusual circumstances, the only way the *get* could be delivered legally was by US registered mail, since that was considered an authorized agent of the US government. I communicated this procedure to a representative of the Jewish community in Morocco and sent the *get* by registered mail to the airman's wife. Although the airman was soon transferred to another base and I never heard from him again, I assumed that the procedure involved in executing the bill of divorce was successful.

When I was in my second year in Alaska (1963), President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas on November 22. It was a tragedy that shook the entire country and resonated around the world, and it will forever be etched in my memory. Like almost any other member of that generation, I can recall exactly where I was when I heard the unbelievable news that the President had been shot. I was watching Walter Cronkite on television in the Bachelor Officers' Quarters (BOQ) at Eielson Air Force Base outside Fairbanks when Cronkite took off his glasses and, choking up, confirmed the President's death. All of the chaplains on the base were instructed to conduct a special memorial service for the late President. I expected upward of one hundred Air Force personnel to attend; instead, to my astonishment, about

three hundred service personnel of all ranks came to the service. Most of them, unfortunately, I never saw again.

### **A Sense of Humor Goes a Long Way**

To survive the extremely cold climate of Alaska and the dark days of winter, when there was light for only two hours a day, you had to have a good sense of humor. I made some very good friends when I was at Elmendorf, among them Naomi Rosenberg, the wife of Lt. Col. Leslie Rosenberg, who oversaw the base electronic communications. Both husband and wife had a very peculiar sense of humor, which I was to experience in various ways throughout my stay in Alaska. The first time was when one of the Protestant chaplains invited me to have dinner with his family. When we sat down to the meal, his wife expressed great satisfaction that she had consulted Naomi Rosenberg about what food could be served to the Jewish chaplain, and Naomi had told her that I loved crab meat and shrimp and that a good main course would be pork chops—all of which the Protestant chaplain's wife cheerfully served. I was terribly embarrassed to have to explain that this was one of Naomi's jokes and that I hoped my host wouldn't be insulted if I only ate the salad and the dessert.

Sometimes not even a good sense of humor was enough to deal with the Alaskan climate. Conducting services on alternate weekends at Air Force and Army bases outside Anchorage and Fairbanks, as well as—periodically—at other armed forces bases elsewhere in the state, I would always try to be prepared for the different weather conditions I might encounter. But on one occasion, I had left Anchorage for Fairbanks when the weather in both cities was above zero and clear, so I wore only my regular winter uniform with a light-weight windbreaker. By the time I was to leave Fairbanks, however, the weather had suddenly changed, and the temperature had unexpectedly dropped severely—to about twenty degrees below zero. Still, I wasn't that concerned because I was scheduled to return to Anchorage on an Alaskan Airlines flight.

Unfortunately, given that the weather had unexpectedly deteriorated, Alaskan Airlines canceled its flight to Anchorage; the only available flight left was on an Air Force transport that was to depart immediately. In a hurry to return to Anchorage because I had several programs scheduled for the next day, I literally ran to catch the flight without going through the usual clothing-check procedure. I found myself on an old DC-3 aircraft with only



side-benches for seating and without the heating found on commercial airlines. The other military personnel returning from winter maneuvers were properly dressed for the flight, but I was definitely not. Within a few minutes of takeoff, my fellow passengers became aware that I was unprepared for the descending temperature in the plane, which was rapidly approaching the below-zero mark. Without being asked, several of the passengers began wrapping their sleeping bags and extra blankets around me, while two others started rubbing my feet to prevent frostbite—until we descended into Anchorage. It was an experience that I would not wish to repeat. Yet I hoped that if I ever had to face such a situation again, I would have as fellow passengers ones who were as compassionate as these men were and who would show the same empathy toward me in my potentially disastrous condition.

Despite having mosquitoes in summer that seemed to grow to the size of a fist and winters with temperatures of 20 to 60 degrees below zero Fahrenheit, Alaska had much to offer: beautiful national parks and preserves encompassing millions of acres of interior wilderness and a terrain of tundra, spruce forest, and glaciers, a great mixture of wildlife, and Mount McKinley, North America's tallest peak. If one had the time, it was nature's wonderland to explore. Unfortunately, my only excursions were the occasional visits to a park and glacier close to Anchorage.

### Encounter with an Israeli Chaplain

Later that year, I received a call from the chief of army chaplains in San Francisco requesting that I fly there to attend a reception for Shlomo Goren, the chief Israeli military chaplain, who had asked to meet the American Jewish military chaplains on the West Coast. I dutifully attended the reception, which I recall was held in the officers' club of the Presidio. Goren was very solicitous of me because I spoke to him in Hebrew, and he told me, confidentially, that the American military personnel who were present at the reception thought that he held the rank of *Rav Aluf*, the equivalent of a lieutenant general in the US Army, when he was actually only an *Aluf*, the equivalent of a major general. I kept his secret, and afterward he invited me to visit him the next time I was in Israel.

That summer, before leaving Alaska for my vacation, I wrote to tell Goren that I was planning to be in Israel in June. I had had no reason to doubt the sincerity of his invitation, but I never expected the reception I received when I got to Israel. Upon my arrival at Lod Airport, a military jeep was waiting

for me on the tarmac. I was driven to the large military base in Tel Aviv and ushered into Goren's office. The first thing he said to me was "Where is your uniform?"

I explained to him that, since I was not on military business and had flown on a commercial airline into a foreign country, I was not even *allowed* to wear my uniform. He was disappointed because he had wanted to show me off as an example of a Jewish chaplain in the American military. Even so, he was pleased to see me and took me on a tour of the facility. Afterward, we drove to several military bases in the area. Apparently, he was on an inspection tour, checking on the activities of the military chaplains at various bases; he always introduced me as a Jewish-American Air Force chaplain. At one base, he left me alone in the base kitchen, and the enlisted man in charge asked if I wanted to see the ovens and other kitchen equipment. As we went through the entire kitchen, he asked me if I approved. Then I understood: since I had come with Rabbi Goren, the NCO thought I was a *mashgiach*, a *kashrut* supervisor of kitchens—that is, the official who assessed whether or not the kitchen was kosher. Well, everything looked good to me, so I just nodded from time to time and left the official approval up to Goren when he returned to inspect the kitchen. The remainder of my vacation in Israel went well, though I was constantly being accosted and asked for an autograph. Apparently, *I Like Mike* was still showing in Israel.

Before leaving for my vacation that summer, I gave the keys to my rooms in the BOQ at Elmendorf to a friend, which was standard procedure when any of the BOQ occupants left the base for an extended period of time. That friend was none other than Lt. Col. Leslie Rosenberg. When I returned from my vacation, I opened one of the eight hundred books in my library, only to find—much to my chagrin—that it contained several paper cutouts of women wearing various styles of bras and girdles, apparently illustrations from a department store catalogue. As I went through the rest of the books, I found the same thing: every book had numerous such cutouts. It took me some time to remove all of them—at least, I thought I had removed them all.

But years later, when I was serving as a rabbi in Los Angeles, a friend opened a book in my library, and one of those cutouts fell out. I don't know whether he believed my explanation of what had happened in Alaska. Apparently, after I had left for my vacation, Naomi Rosenberg had had a party in my rooms and invited a number of her friends to join her. Each friend brought a Sears catalogue and a pair of scissors. It took several hours, but in that time they were able to fill all of my books with the best lingerie Sears had to offer.

## The Great Alaskan Earthquake

Unquestionably, the most unusual and dramatic experience I had in Alaska began early on Friday evening, March 27, 1964—Good Friday in the Christian tradition and the first night of Passover in the Jewish tradition. Something strange happened to me on the way to the *seder* that was to be held at Elmendorf Air Force Base, to which we had invited the local Jewish community. At 5:38 p.m., I was shaving in my rooms on the second floor of the BOQ when I suddenly felt a sharp jolt. As the building I was in began to shake, I immediately realized it was an earthquake. Grabbing my shirt, I ran to the door, intending to get out of the building. But when I stepped onto the stairs, the shaking was so severe that it seemed as though the bottom of the staircase was rising, and the top, where I was standing, was sinking. It was clear that I could not flee the building, so I stood under the doorjamb, thinking that would be the safest place, but the shaking increased in intensity, and I was thrown to the floor. At that point, my only recourse was to crawl to the bedroom and lie on the bed, holding onto the two sides of the mattress as the shaking got worse and worse—seeming to go on forever.

Later, I learned that the quake had lasted for four minutes and registered 9.2 on the Richter scale, the largest earthquake ever recorded in the United States and the second largest ever recorded in the world. The quake and the aftershocks were felt as far away as Texas. The 115 casualties in Alaska mostly resulted from tsunamis, since the quake took place late in the afternoon, when most stores in downtown Anchorage had been closed. The downtown area, however, was torn up, and a number of city blocks were destroyed. As soon as the shaking stopped, I wanted to call my parents to tell them I was all right. Stumbling into what was left of my sitting room, I found the phone and dialed the Air Force base in Fairbanks, asking them to connect me with the Air Force base at Niagara Falls, which could dial directly to my parents' home in Buffalo. The connection was made, and I spoke to my father, assuring him that whatever he heard about the quake in Alaska, I was okay. Later, I learned that the quake had broken not only the water, gas, and power lines but also the telephone land lines. The phone lines were not restored for several weeks, so I'll never know how my call to Buffalo, New York, got through.

As soon as I had recovered from the initial shock and realized that the *seder* would not take place, I drove to some of the homes of the military families to make sure that they were all right. Power was not restored for the

next few days, and in the meantime the temperature dropped to well below zero at night. In order to be assured that the motor of my VW would start in the morning, I connected an electrical switch to the oil stick in my car and plugged it into the electrical outlet in my BOQ. It was safer to sleep in the car for the next few days than to stay in the BOQ and have to exit the building in the face of the constant aftershocks. Because there was a lack of water on the base and some grocery stores had been destroyed, I offered the wine and food that had been set aside for the *seder*—which were still intact—for distribution to personnel on the base. I was told later that many people used the wine to brush their teeth.

After the third week, when the aftershocks had died down somewhat, I returned to my office on the third floor of the administration building. The building was constructed of cinderblocks, and it had to be checked before it was declared safe to enter. On my second day back in my office, there was another severe aftershock, and I immediately flew out of my office. I ran down three flights of stairs, and on reaching the first floor, I quickly headed for the exit. As I turned the corner of the staircase, a woman on crutches came around the other side, and we crashed into each other. Fortunately, no one was hurt, but the joke of the week on the base was the one about the Jewish chaplain who had knocked down a female officer on crutches.

### Departing Alaska

Over the next two months, while the aftershocks diminished in intensity, I prepared to say farewell to the many friends I had made. My plan was to return to Buffalo, visit with my family, and then take up a position as assistant rabbi at Temple Beth Hillel in the San Fernando Valley, in Los Angeles, California, where I had interviewed earlier that year. As I was boarding my flight to Buffalo, Naomi Rosenberg and some other friends came to say goodbye, and Naomi gave me a box. She said it contained a goodbye gift from her, but I was not to open it until the plane was in the air. Twenty minutes into the flight, I opened the box, and out jumped a small kitten. In its frightened state, it scrambled onto the floor and began running under the seats on the right side of the plane, much to the consternation of the passengers. Since they didn't know what was happening, many of them began screaming, standing up, and moving to the left side of the plane. As a result, the plane seemed to list to the left, and that brought the pilot out of the cockpit, wanting to know what was happening. Fortunately, one of the stewardesses had caught

the cat and then had gone through the plane asking whom it belonged to. No one claimed ownership, but I did say that I had found a box on the floor in which the cat could be kept. The stewardess was very understanding; she said that she would take the cat home when we landed in Seattle. Thus Naomi Rosenberg's last caper targeting me ended without any disastrous results.

### **The Civilian Rabbinate, 1964–1967**

When I arrived in Los Angeles to take up my position at Temple Beth Hillel, I was practically broke. So I asked the temple administrator where I could cash the check I had received as an advance on my salary. He said that one of the members of the temple board owned a gas station just down the road, and I could cash the check there. I drove up to the gas station and told the attendant in charge that I had been informed at the temple that he would cash my check. He, of course, asked for identification and wanted to know where I worked, and I explained that I was the rabbi at the temple. That's when he told me that he knew the rabbi and that I was an imposter. Furthermore, he said, "I'm going to call the police!" I explained that I was the new assistant rabbi, and it was only after he called the temple to verify that I was who I said I was that he agreed to cash my check. This was my introduction to life in the San Fernando Valley. To solve my liquidity problem, I went to the Bank of America and applied for a credit card, but the clerk informed me that I would have to establish six months of credit in Los Angeles before I would be issued a card. How things have changed in the last fifty years!

My introduction to temple life also had its interesting moments. I started my work at the temple in July 1964, and I began my pulpit experience on the first Friday after Rabbi Bauman, whom I was assisting, went on vacation. Before he left, he told me that the temple board had decided to switch the pronunciation of Hebrew in the prayer service from Ashkenazic to Sephardic Hebrew, which I agreed to do, much to the surprise and dismay of some in the congregation. After the service, I was told that no one had informed the congregation about this change. How did I, as the brand-new assistant rabbi, have the chutzpah to make the change on my own. It turned out that my boss had not told me the whole story. Yes, the board had made the decision, but they hadn't decided *when* to implement it. Apparently, Rabbi Bauman was somewhat hesitant about beginning the use of Sephardic Hebrew in the service, so he wanted to try it out to see how it went. What better time than when he was on vacation, when I could be the guinea pig.

My first funeral occurred during the first month of my arrival at Temple Beth Hillel, and it was for a parent of a congregant I had not met. After speaking with the congregant and learning something about the deceased, I prepared a eulogy and proceeded to the cemetery, which was renowned for having Al Jolson's tomb. The final prayer was the *Kadesh* (the "Mourner's Prayer"); when it was finished, there was complete silence, and no one moved. Suddenly, from the back of the room, an elderly man stood up and shouted, "Rabbi, you forgot to say, 'This concludes the service.'"

My experience at Beth Hillel, however, was generally positive. I felt almost from the outset that I was most fortunate to work with such a young, active, and responsive congregation, the second largest in the Los Angeles area. Not only did I perform the usual rabbinic tasks of conducting services, marrying, burying, visiting the sick, teaching in the religious school, conducting adult education courses, and participating in temple board meetings, but I was occasionally called on to represent the Jewish community at interfaith events. Sometimes this involved sitting on the podium with a Hollywood movie star, such as Linda Darnell or Diane Baker, which was always a pleasant assignment.

I also made every effort to focus on the role that the state of Israel played in the Jewish religion by bringing Israelis such as Yael Dayan to speak at the temple and by helping to raise funds for some of the temple youth to study in Israel. Indeed, the temple youth group was one of my favorite responsibilities. In an effort to broaden the group's range of experience by exposing them to different aspects of Jewish life, I organized a series of speakers on subjects that they would not normally encounter in the temple's regular program. I always approached the subjects—some dealing with civil rights, the war in Vietnam, or contemporary literature and poetry—from the perspective of Jewish morality. On one such occasion, I invited the poet Allen Ginsberg, icon of the Beat Generation and author of *Howl* and *Kaddish*, to read and discuss his poetry.<sup>3</sup> It was an unusual evening. Ginsberg brought his male significant other along with him, and one of the adults present was upset. But the members of the youth group related well to Ginsberg's reading, and it was a most successful evening.

### A Student Excursion to Israel

In the spring of my first year at Beth Hillel, I was asked by the head of the Jewish Federation of Los Angeles to lead a group of eighteen sixteen-year-olds

from various Reform and Conservative temples on a summer's educational visit to Israel. I, of course, was excited by this opportunity, and so was the temple board. During the several meetings I had with representatives of the federation, we worked out the summer schedule, educational courses, field trips, and general logistical issues, which were then confirmed in writing by the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem, the Israeli organization responsible for the program.

We made arrangements to stay at Meir Shefeah, a youth agricultural village not far from Haifa, and I was to be assisted by a Conservative rabbi from Los Angeles. Two months before leaving for Israel, I met with all the students participating in the trip and their parents. In addition, the federation asked me to meet separately with the parents of a certain student. I was the only one, they said, who could give that student permission to go on this trip. I was greatly surprised to learn that the student in question was sightless. His parents were quite open about the potential problems that the students of the group and I might encounter. When I met with this student, however, I decided that he was an exceptionally bright young man who should be included, though he would no doubt encounter great difficulties on such a trip.

The flight to Israel went well, and the bus that met us at the airport took the group directly to Meir Shefeah, where we arrived in the early evening. Much to my dismay, however, the head of the village, though he vaguely knew that a group of Americans was supposed to be there during that summer, was never told by the Jewish Agency how many teenagers there were and when they would arrive. The next few days were chaotic, because there were not enough rooms and beds for the group. But in the end, the residents of Meir Shefeah went out of their way to help us find accommodations for the whole group.

Unfortunately, there remained one huge problem. The Jewish Agency in Jerusalem had not made the necessary arrangements for the course curriculum that we had arranged for in Los Angeles: there were no teachers, no books, and no other supplies. The head of the Jewish Federation in Los Angeles was amazed when I explained all of this to him by phone, and we decided that I should go to Jerusalem to straighten the matter out. After a great deal of difficulty in arranging that meeting, I finally met the person responsible for setting up the summer program. He admitted his failure to arrange the program that we had agreed on in our correspondence, but he could only offer an apology. While he was able to help with some of the items

on the program, including the field trips, the rest was up to my Los Angeles colleague and me.

It did take some time, but we were able to work things out, and, except for a few issues, the program was a huge success. One of the highlights was when the Israeli movie actor Topol, my old friend from *I Like Mike*, agreed to my request to speak to the group about Israeli cinema and theater. Other highlights included extensive field trips throughout the country, which provided a sense of authenticity to our studies of Jewish history. The sightless student did very well on the whole, adjusting to his new environment with the help of his fellow students.

In the weeks following our return to Los Angeles, the group of teenagers from the Israel trip kept showing up at my apartment unannounced; and each time we had a kind of reunion, sharing photos and talking about our experiences in Israel. This went on for about three months, at which point I started receiving concerned phone calls from some of the parents. They complained that their kids were talking about returning to live in Israel and were investigating the possibility of enrolling at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem instead of going to college in the United States. Apparently, the summer experience was a greater success than I had realized. In the end, most of the students returned to their regular routine and to college as they had planned; only a few eventually went on to study in Israel. The last I heard, a few had made *aliya* and remained in Israel, including the sightless student.

### **The DC March Against the Vietnam War**

Back at work at the temple, I found that, though a vociferous component of the temple membership was involved in the civil rights movement and was against the war in Vietnam, the temple members as a whole seemed to be more conservative in their views and tended to lean toward a less involved approach to current events. Nevertheless, my sermons on the Vietnam War and my activity in the civil rights movement had some effect. By my second year, when the Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish clergy of Los Angeles rented a plane to fly to Washington, DC, to demonstrate against the Vietnam War, the temple funded my trip. This proved to be quite an experience. Our march in front of the White House with signs protesting the war was not only permitted but was covered by all the TV networks. It was too bad that our request to present our protest to the administration was not accepted. Instead, we were broken up into small groups and given permission to meet with members



of the Senate and House of Representatives. My group met with Republican senator Everett Dirksen of Illinois, whom I respected because he had voted against his party in supporting President Johnson's Civil Rights Act. Sadly, the senator was not sympathetic to our protest against the Vietnam War. He said to us, "I don't imagine any of you have been in a war, as I have during the Great War [World War I], and so you can't understand the value of the camaraderie that soldiers feel in the battlefield." I don't think any of us left that meeting satisfied with the senator's response.

### **Confronting the John Birch Society**

In addition to my regular duties at the temple, I enjoyed speaking at different venues in the community. I had prepared a series of lectures on American Jewish literature and biblical archaeology, and the latter subject brought me several speaking engagements at churches and community centers. One of those, located in an Orange County community center, turned out to be quite unusual. When I arrived, the host told me that there would be a brief film before my presentation. It turned out that the film was produced by the John Birch Society, an extreme right-wing political organization, and was a sharp attack on former President Dwight D. Eisenhower and his secretary of state, General George C. Marshall, accusing them of being communists.

At the end of the film, when I was introduced by my host, an attendee asked me what I thought of the film—and I knew I was in trouble. Mumbling a few words about not being involved in politics, I turned on the slide projector and launched into my lecture, which I completed in record time. My host then asked me to respond to questions about the lecture; again, members of the audience thought that included my opinion of the Birch Society film. I began to cough, claiming that I was losing my voice, thanked my host and the audience, and quietly fled the center.

### **Departing Temple Beth Hillel**

Although I was satisfied with my work at the temple, I was aware from the very beginning that I would dry up intellectually if I were not to continue my studies. This was part of my agreement with the board of the congregation, though Rabbi Bauman had been hesitant about it. My plan was to start taking courses in ancient languages as background to my research on Jewish history and rabbinics. Thus I planned to take a course in Ugaritic at UCLA,

taught by Jonas Greenfield, whom I would encounter years later as a teacher and friend when I returned to Israel. Unfortunately, spending a few hours a week attending classes and studying at home did not turn out to be enough for serious work. And so I decided to devote full time to the temple, and after the first year, when I had more or less become accustomed to temple life, I would try again.

This time, I began a Doctor of Hebrew Letters (DHL) program at HUC–JIR in Los Angeles, which for the most part required me to do only three things: have individual sessions with a professor, pass the French and German language exams offered by the Princeton Educational Testing Service at UCLA, and write a dissertation. It was a much lighter program than a course of study for a PhD required, and it seemed to fit my needs at the time. However, at the end of my second year, when the temple board asked me to renew my contract for three years, I explained that, whereas I would very much like to continue at the temple, I had come to realize that to pursue my research in earnest, I needed some real time off.

Much to my delight, the board agreed to a new contract that included my being absent from the temple one full day and two afternoons a week. Thus I began my third year with the expectation that I would remain at Beth Hillel for the near future and be able to accomplish my research plans. Unfortunately, I was not told that Rabbi Bauman was unhappy with my new contract, and after a few months it was evident that the arrangement wouldn't work. I could understand Bauman's point of view: he wanted a full-time assistant, and instead he got me. I told the board that I would finish the year, but afterward I would have to leave, because I didn't want to come between Bauman and the congregation. The board tried to convince me to remain, but it had become evident that it would be best for me to go.

At that point, three members of the board said that they would fund my studies and living expenses for the next two to three years if I agreed to return to Beth Hillel when I finished my research and had earned my degree. I was overwhelmed by their generous offer, and I seriously considered it, since I had developed a close relationship with many members of the congregation and found it very difficult to leave.<sup>4</sup> It was personally difficult because I felt that I had found a home at Beth Hillel and could look forward to a long-term association with the temple. But, as I explained to them, I could not commit to how I would feel three years hence. Besides, Bauman needed an assistant in the meantime, and it would be unfair to hire someone just for the three-year period I would be gone, an arrangement with which Bauman

would not be happy. Thus I planned to leave Beth Hillel in June of that year. Although I was passionate about and totally committed to continuing my education, leaving what had been a satisfying and secure career, and one for which I had spent years preparing, was not an easy decision. At that point, my future was almost a complete question mark.