

“Remembering My Hebrew Teacher, Mr. Jerushalmy” **by Joe Levy**

Introduction: As a young boy growing up in the Bronx in the late 1940's and early 1950's, my Jewish education was very much different than that of our Hilton Head youth attending Congregation Beth Yam's religious school. I feel a deep sense of nostalgia when I think back upon that experience and those years. I also feel a deep sense of gratitude toward that funny looking little man with the odd name who taught me Hebrew and implanted many of the seeds of my Jewish identity, which did not bear fruit until many decades later. I owe him much, including an extremely belated apology. The following little memoir is one part nostalgia, one part gratitude and several parts confession and contrition for the small sins of a young kid from the Bronx. There are few Jewish resources more valuable than those who teach our children to follow the path.

Nissan Jerushalmy. Nissan Jerushalmy. You were named after a month in the Hebrew calendar. You carried the name of a city with the most sacred connotations to the Jewish people. You were my Hebrew teacher for about three years. The period was, as I recall, 1948 to 1951, that important time when Israel was emerging as a nation among the nations of this world. You had even told us, proudly, on many occasions, that you had lived a good part of your youth in what was then called Palestine. We, boys of little sensitivity, cultural or otherwise, did not appreciate the importance of that piece of personal history.

You were the man who taught me how to read and write Hebrew, who taught a smattering of Torah, of Jewish history. I was one of the flock of young boys, your students, who tormented and ridiculed you, who mocked you behind your back but never would have had the effrontery to mock you to your face. Every month I extracted from the depths of a pants pocket a wrinkled five dollar bill, courtesy of my parents, to reward you for your labors. Now I look back with half a century of perspective and wonder. Did you curse the fate that brought you to making a living from your chosen profession of teaching youth in your converted living room in that dingy West Bronx neighborhood? You would have at least a dozen of us seated facing you, from those ugly wooden benches, salvaged from God knows what old schoolroom. You could look out upon our all too frequently disinterested, distracted faces or look beyond the faces to see the small window, actually set below street level, protected by a metal grating and watch the occasional feet shuffle past. Did you curse your fate or did you feel you were answering a higher calling?

You must by now be long dead. A child's memory is not always accurate, but I believe that even then, in the years leading up to my Bar Mitzvah, for which you so well trained me, you were an old man. Now, it is I who is the old man. You were short, fat, bald, comical looking, and partially because of that, ridiculed by your students. I was not always kind, although I can blame my weakness on the leadership of my friends: Ernie Broder, whom we always called “Dead Boy,” for reasons obscure, possibly related to his lackadaisical attitude and his big lumbering physique and Gary Rosenberg.

Now, there is my personal guilt to confess. I need to confess to the most simple and direct of facts. First fact. Much of my Jewish identity and my ability to comprehend that mysterious and ancient language possessed by us Jews, I owe to you. Second fact. I sinned deeply the sins of disrespect and mockery upon you and inadequately appreciated the treasure you gave me. Dead Boy and most of the others also sinned, and I have no idea whether they still carry the weight of these sins upon their backs. It is too late to apologize directly to you, since your ears have long since turned to a more elemental, unhearing form. To admit to the sin is important although you are long gone.

I admit. The misdeeds were many. We giggled while you read. We giggled at the words of a sacred language. We giggled because the words sounded funny to us. Many of them we decided resembled words funny or obscene in English. Dead Boy may have been the leader, but I was an eager follower in that endeavor. We were supposed to wear yarmulkes to class but on several occasions showed up with inappropriate head gear – cowboy hats for one. One time I played hookey and a Gentile friend and I tormented you and disrupted one class hour by calling you on the telephone and saying something inappropriate or silly each time you picked up the receiver. That telephone was right there at your desk in your living room/classroom.

You could not have had much of a life. Besides that living room there was your ugly little kitchen, with its worn linoleum, in which we would gather noisily and wait for the previous class hour to clear out – your classes were grouped by age or reading level, and we could play checkers for a few minutes at the ugly little table in the ugly little kitchen, while our noises no doubt distracted the earlier class. At the other end of the apartment, the end into which we never ventured, there must have been a small bedroom, one in which you slept alone. Wife? Children? We lacked the compassion to care whether anyone in the real world ever loved Nissan Jerushalmy. My pre-teen mind could not understand the concepts of living alone, living unloved.

How can I forget my Bar Mitzvah preparation at your hands? Not only did my nonmusical, still-changing voice learn to chant the blessings, it also learned to chant the Torah portion using those odd little notes with their special melody. I can remember many of their names: Pash•tah, Mu•nach, Zar•e•cha, Mei•re•cha, Tip•e•cha. Many more I have forgotten. I remember the speech you taught me to deliver. You took from your pocket that little yellow square of paper, unfolded it, unfolded it again, and again and again. At last it bloomed out in its full eight and a half by eleven inch span. Its opening words are in the permanent memory compartment of my brain: Dear parents, grandparents, relatives and friends. So I spoke them. “No, no,” you corrected me. “Levy, say it like this. Dear PAR-ents, GRAND-parents, REL-atives, and FRIENDS” (the words rising and falling like a roller coaster car). I chanted, I learned, I memorized, I spoke. I practiced with you after class for a couple of times a week for about three months, plus considerable practice at home. How many additional five dollar bills did you get for your labors?

The Bar Mitzvah itself was at a little shul near Pelham Parkway in the East Bronx, the same day and place as my cousin Eli, whom I preceded in birth by six days and whom I exceeded in size by about a foot and seventy pounds. I did my Torah portion well. And when I stood up to deliver my speech to the assembled multitudes, a six foot tall thirteen year old with arms rigidly at sides, fingertips touching the shiny blue gabardine suit jacket, and began reciting the 'dear parents, grandparents, relatives and friends' saga, I saw your round, bald little head out there in the audience, watching me, smiling slightly, in satisfaction at your star pupil (and secret tormentor). I did not see you in the basement of the shul immediately afterward, as congregants, most of them older than my grandparents, enjoyed the homemade platter of tuna salad prepared by my mother and my Aunt Lil, and some of them sipped whiskey from tiny paper cups. In fact, I never saw you again. I was not possessed of sufficient sensibility to realize, until many, many years later, that you must have walked that entire distance from your little apartment in the West Bronx to Pelham Parkway and back. That entire distance was at least five miles, and I know you did not own an automobile, and would not have driven in one or ridden the subway on Shabbos to get there.

I must have been a good student. You must have been a good teacher. Rest in peace, Nissan Jerushalmy. The next time I say the mourner's Kaddish I promise to carry your name in my heart