

My Jewish Education in Providence during the 1960s and 1970s

Ernest Davis

My Family

My parents were born on the same day, January 2, 1923: my father, Philip Davis, in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and my mother, Hadassah Finkelstein Davis, in New York City.

¹They started college-- Harvard and Radcliffe-- in 1939, at the age of 16. They were married on their 21st birthday, January 2, 1944, in New York City. They had four children: my older sister, Abby; my older brother, Frank; myself; and my younger brother, Joey.

My father, a mathematician, was the chief of numerical analysis at the National Bureau of Standards in Washington, DC. Our family lived in Chevy Chase, Maryland and belonged to Congregation Adas Israel. We moved to Providence in 1963, when my father became a mathematics professor at Brown University.

Life in Providence suited my parents very well. My mother in particular soon became a great enthusiast for Providence and for Rhode Island. She did a master's degree at Brown in American History. Roger Williams in particular was one of her heroes. Throughout her life she continued to study Rhode Island history and she wrote numerous pieces about it,

including a few for Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes. My father was happy at Brown and had many good friends among his colleagues there.

My parents were members of Temple Emanu-El. They were moderately observant but by no means strictly so. They kept kosher but not rigorously. They observed the holidays in a positive sense: *Kiddush* on Friday nights, and a festive meal with seasonal foods on *Yom Tov*; seders on Passover, often a *sukkah* on Sukkot, menorah-lighting and presents on Hanukah. They did not follow the prohibitions, however. They felt free to drive, use electricity, and so forth on *Shabbat* and *Yom Tov*.

My mother went to shul from time to time; my father, only on the High Holy Days. Later in her life, my mother was part of a class led by Rabbi Saul Leeman, which read through the entire *Tanakh* in Hebrew. My father's Hebrew, as he once complained, never got past "Hebrew II," in spite of many efforts.

At this time, my mother's father, Louis Finkelstein, was chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), the leader of Conservative Judaism in the United States, and a noted scholar. Within and beyond the Jewish community, he was widely admired and honored, and I adored him.

Most years, I took a train by myself down to New York City to be with him for the Passover seders and for the first days of Sukkot. (He lived alone; my grandmother and he had been divorced before I was born.) Grandpa, a Jewish scholar and a religious leader, was scrupulously strict in all of his religious observances. His apartment was filled, floor to ceiling, with Jewish books. Early in the morning, my grandfather used to study Talmud for

an hour every day; he also knew the *Mishnah* by heart. He would tell stories of his teachers at the Seminary, such as Solomon Schechter, and about his own father, who was an Orthodox rabbi in Brooklyn. He would invite many guests to share the holidays with him. I remember meeting Elie Wiesel and Hannah Arendt, for example.

Providence Hebrew Day School

When my family lived in Washington D.C., my parents sent my older sister and brother to public school. After our family moved to Providence in 1963, these two siblings remained in public school. There was no Jewish high school for Abby, and Frank would start high school the next year. But my parents decided that my younger brother, Joey, and I should go to PHDS, Providence Hebrew Day School, at its recently built Elmgrove Avenue building. I was in second grade.

At this time, PHDS, was an Orthodox school, but not nearly as strictly Orthodox as it later became. Most of the students were from Conservative families. Few of the boys wore *kippot* or *tzitzit* outside of school. Many of the teachers, particularly in the younger grades, did not emphasize Orthodox teachings, and the Conservative parents, at the time, did not feel that the school challenged their religious choices.

PHDS met from 8:30 AM to 3:30 PM. Half the day was spent on secular studies, and the other half on Jewish studies: Hebrew language and grammar, but also *Chumash* with Rashi and, in later grades, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, and Talmud. The study of *Mishnah* began in 5th grade, *Gemara* in 6th. Each day began with morning prayers, and at lunch we sang *birkat ha-mazon* after eating.

The State of Israel was a constant presence at school. We sang Israeli songs; we read about Israel in Hebrew classes; we celebrated *Yom Ha'atzma'ut*. In June of 1967, when the Six Day War broke out, we prayed for victory.

By contrast, the *Sho'ah* was seldom mentioned. We had heard of it, of course, but it was almost never discussed in class, and *Yom Ha'Shoah* was not observed.

Rabbi Cohen, Cantor Gewirtz, and Rabbi Raizman

When I arrived at PHDS in 1963, Rabbi Akiva Egozi was principal. In 1964, he was succeeded by Rabbi David Yehuda. I barely remember them. I vividly remember their successor, Rabbi Norman (Nachman) Cohen, who took over in 1967. Rabbi Cohen was intense, serious, and very Orthodox in his views and practice. His appointment marked a turn in the Day School toward greater Orthodoxy.

One incident involving Rabbi Cohen, though small, made a lasting impression on me. In the sixth grade, my class had been increasingly at odds with our teachers. We got along poorly with Rabbi Traub, who was our teacher for religious subjects in the fall, and worse with Dr. Rosmarin, who took that over in the spring. Neither teacher had any idea how to deal with a class of unruly eleven-year-olds, and the classroom atmosphere was generally nasty and hostile on both sides. Our class acquired a reputation, no doubt deserved, for being difficult; the fact that it was a large class, consisting mostly of boys, probably made things worse.

Toward the start of the seventh grade, Rabbi Cohen came in for a short meeting with the class. This was very unusual in itself. Toward the beginning of the meeting, he said to us, "Last year, we made a mistake; his name was Rosmarin." I was very surprised, both that he would think of it that way, and that he would admit it so frankly to us.

Seventh grade was better. Our new teachers that year for secular topics-- Mrs. Roberta Eck for English and history, Mrs. Corrado for math and science-- were much better and more easily connected with us than our teachers in previous grades. Very likely, we had matured a little as well.

In seventh grade, Cantor Norman Gewirtz of Temple Beth-El organized a choral group for students in my class and adjoining ones. He had written melodies and two-part choral arrangements for a number of passages from the *Siddur* and the *Pirkei Avot*. He taught these to us, and we performed them at some kind of school event. The songs have stuck with me for fifty-five years; I recently wrote down the music and posted it on my website.ⁱⁱ

The most remarkable new teacher that year, though, was Rabbi Chaim Raizman, who taught us *Chumash* and *Talmud*. He was one of the most charismatic and engaging teachers I have ever known. Extremely Orthodox, he believed in the literal truth, both of the Bible and of traditional Jewish legends of all eras-- from Biblical times to modern, miracle-working Hasidic *rebbes*. His frank enthusiasm made his teaching charming.

That year Rabbi Raizman taught us the chapters of Leviticus that deal with the Temple service and the Talmudic tractate *Bava Kamma*, which is the law of torts. In Rabbi

Raizman's hands, this material, which can easily be very dry, seemed engaging, important, and profound.

Temple Emanu-El, Rabbi Eli Bohnen, and Rabbi Joel Zaiman

While I was growing up, I mostly prayed at Temple Emanu-El: in the children's service before my bar mitzvah, and in the USY (United Synagogue Youth) service after my bar mitzvah. I was part of the *Hazanim*, a group which did the cantorial singing at the children's service. The group was all boys; this was before the days of egalitarian Conservative services.

The senior rabbi at Temple Emanu-El was Eli Bohnen, who served from 1948 to 1973. He was universally beloved as a generous and sweet soul and admired as a man of sterling character; a *ba'al middot*, as my grandfather used to say. He was unfailingly gentle and pleasant-- I don't remember ever seeing him angry-- but it was evident that his gentleness came from strength and commitment. A U.S. Army chaplain during World War II, he had participated in the liberation of Dachau, which made an indelible impression on him. His wife, Eleanor, was warmth incarnate.

On Shabbat afternoons, he used to host a dozen or so teenagers for study and pizza. Usually, we would study the weekly *parashah*. Our meeting would end with *Havdalah*. Rabbi Bohnen would make *Havdalah* over brandy; at the end, he would pour the brandy into a dish and light it on fire.

Rabbi Joel Zaiman was assistant rabbi at Temple Emanu-El until Rabbi Bohnen's retirement in 1973; he then served as senior rabbi until 1980. Rabbi Zaiman was much

more formidable; no less admired than Rabbi Bohnen, but not as beloved. He was fiercely intellectual. His sermons were questioning, demanding, and unsatisfied with the spiritual state of the world; his exaggeratedly precise enunciation emphasized that. He took over the Shabbat afternoon study sessions, but pizza was downgraded to pretzels.

Ba'al Koreh: Camp Ramah, Cantor Lurie, and Temple Beth Sholom

When I was nine and ten years old, I attended Camp Ramah New England for two summers. The camp is located in Palmer, Massachusetts.

Ramah formed an important part of my Jewish education in two respects. The first was the *Shoah*. As I wrote above, it was not much talked about at the Hebrew Day School or in my family. I only knew in general terms what had happened.

My first real awareness of it came at Camp Ramah. *Tisha b'Av* always falls in the middle of the camp's season, and, at Ramah, its focus was much more about the *Shoah* than anything else. We had readings from a pamphlet-- excerpts from Elie Wiesel, poems written by children at Theresienstadt, and so on-- and a talk by an Auschwitz survivor.

The second reason for my heightened Jewish education was more complicated. At Camp Ramah's Shabbat services, the pre-bar mitzvah boys could get called for *maftir*. They would recite the blessing for the *Haftarah*, and then the cantor, who was a counselor, would read the *Haftarah*. So, we were taught the tune for the *Haftarah* blessing.

When I got home to Providence in the fall, I told my mother that I wanted to learn how to read *Haftarah*. She arranged for lessons with Cantor Lurie, who was the assistant

cantor at Temple Emanu-El. (The senior cantor was Ivan Perlman.) When I went over to Cantor Lurie's office for a lesson, he gave me the trope written out in musical notation, which I knew. (A few years later, he certainly would have given me a cassette tape, but those were still uncommon in 1967.) I took it home, easily learned it, and went back to his office the following week. And at that point, I thought, we were done.

Very much to my surprise, I found out that we were not. Cantor Lurie told me that the next thing I had to do was to learn to read Torah. I don't know whether this was my mother's idea or his; it certainly wasn't mine; but I didn't object. Over the next few weeks, I first learned the Torah trope, and then memorized a few short passages, one per week, and showed them off to Cantor Lurie at our weekly lesson.

After a few weeks, Cantor Lurie told me that our weekly lessons were over. Now I had to learn to read all of *Parashat Bereishit*, which was my bar mitzvah *parashah*, and I should come back and see him when that was done.

I learned it in a leisurely way over a few months. Then I went back to see Cantor Lurie, and I performed for him. When I was finished, he called my mother on the telephone. "Ernie has learned the Torah reading, approximately," he said. "Very approximately. If he's going to read the Torah in *shul*, he has to learn it much better than that."

My bar mitzvah was going to be celebrated in New York, at the synagogue of the Jewish Theological Seminary. My grandfather and all the school's scholars would be attending. I continued working on my *Parashat*, and in a few months I knew it well enough to satisfy Cantor Lurie. So, I was able to read the Torah at my bar mitzvah in October, 1969.

That was just the start of my readings, however. Having continued to learn to read Torah, I read it once every month or two at the USY service at Temple Emanu-El. The Temple read Torah on a triennial cycle, doing only one-third of a *parasha* every week, which made it easier.

When I was in tenth grade, it turned out that Temple Beth Sholom, at that time a Conservative synagogue at Rochambeau Avenue and Camp Street with a small and aging congregation, needed a weekly *ba'al koreh* (Torah reader). Its leaders heard about me. After a trial run, I was hired for \$25 a week.

Learning the entire *parashah* every week required as intense an effort as I've ever put into anything that was not a full-time job. But I did it, and I got quite good at it. I was as good as anyone in Providence, as far as I knew.

Talmud in High School

By the time I finished eighth grade, in 1970, the Hebrew Day School had started an Orthodox high school for boys. Rabbi Cohen, naturally, made a point of urging me to continue there. I was determined, however, to move on to Classical High School, which my older brother and sister had attended.

Never for an instant have I regretted that decision. Even if I had wanted to stay at the Hebrew Day School, I don't know whether my parents would have permitted it. Seldom had they insisted on anything with us, but they might well have drawn the line there.

But in ninth and tenth grades, even after I had moved on to Classical, I studied Talmud once a week privately with Rabbi Chaim Raizman and his son, Aaron. Rabbi Raizman and I met at, Ohawe Shalom, the small shul in Pawtucket, where he had a post. One of my parents would drive me over from our home at 175 Freeman Parkway, and Rabbi Raizman would drive me back. After studying for an hour or so, we would daven *Mincha* and *Ma'ariv*.

In the summer after I finished ninth grade, Rabbi Pearlman, who was a teacher at the Hebrew Day School, organized a group of a dozen or so students for a two-week visit to the Lakewood Yeshiva in New Jersey. He invited me to join them. On the train ride south, he remarked to me that there was no need to let our hosts at the yeshiva know that I was studying at a secular high school and was not ordinarily *shomer mitzvot*.

We stayed in some rented rooms near the yeshiva. The whole day was spent studying Torah: one tractate of the *Gemara* in the morning and a different one from a different *seder* in the afternoon. (I think that it was *Makot* and *Rosh Hashana*.) We also studied various legal and ethical treatises and prayed three times daily. (This may well have been the only time in my life that I said all three prayers daily over a two-week period.)

The elder yeshiva students who taught us also had us over for Shabbat meals (in groups of two). They were very friendly and welcoming and even reasonably open-minded. Although I enjoyed my time at the Lakewood Yeshiva, I later had no temptation whatsoever to spend any serious time in that kind of setting.

Some months later, Rabbi Joel Zaiman gave me private lessons in the tractate *Kiddushin*. In those private lessons in his office, he was more relaxed than in larger, more formal groups. His approach to Talmud was, naturally, more reflective of modern scholarship than anything that I had encountered previously.

Once we were studying a passage in the *Gemara*, which asks why one particular *Mishnah* follows another. Rabbi Zaiman remarked, “The Rabbis here are looking at a question that we, from our heretical standpoint, would phrase more generally as, ‘What is the organizing principle of the *Mishnah*?’ It’s a question, he continued, that we “still haven’t figured out.”

All of this Talmud education was done for free. As far as I know, my parents did not pay either Rabbi Raizman or Rabbi Zaiman, and the Lakewood Yeshiva did not charge us any kind of tuition.

Hebrew High School

During my high school years, I also attended the Hebrew High School sponsored by Rhode Island’s Bureau of Jewish Education. My memories of it are dim, but luckily here I can call on some contemporary notes.

Having been chosen as valedictorian for my class, I wrote an address where I gave a frank assessment of the program’s strengths and weaknesses. (In fact, after the Bureau’s Hebrew High School closed a year later, it was completely reorganized under the auspices of Temple Emanu-El. There were new teachers and a new curriculum.)

Luckily, I showed a draft of my speech to my parents. My father's reaction was, "You are not giving this talk." It was the only time I can remember that my father absolutely forbade me from doing anything. He was completely right and, after looking back, I'm somewhat shocked that, at the age of seventeen, I considered that my remarks would have been at all appropriate for a graduation.

I wrote a new speech about the need for tolerance among factions of the Jewish community. It was well received. However, I did keep my draft, and now it comes in handy as a record.

Our classes had about a half-dozen students, all graduates of the Hebrew Day School. We met about once a week for an hour or two-- sometimes after school, sometimes on Sundays-- in various places. Our teachers, at least in the last years, were Mrs. Rebecca Twersky for religious studies and Segal for Hebrew language.

My ungiven valedictorian address had listed our subjects of study. In Bible, we studied parts of Isaiah and Jeremiah, some of the minor prophets, part of Job, a chapter of Proverbs, and all of Ecclesiastes. In *Mishnah*, we studied part of Rosh Hashanah and part of *Sotah* (a tractate of Talmud). When combining Hebrew language study and Jewish history, we studied the eras 135-800 C.E. and the 20th century from Hebrew textbooks. In Hebrew grammar, we worked our way through the various verb conjugations, and Mr. Segal led us in Hebrew language conversation.

I summarized what we had learned: "We have gained an upper hand in our struggles with the *Pi'el* and the *Pu'al* (two forms of verb conjugation). We are better equipped to

study the Bible and commentary. We can get the gist of an article in an Israeli newspaper, though the finer points may pass us by.”

In the valedictory that I did give, I talked about a series of three talks that we heard one semester from three visitors: Rabbi Cohen from PHDS, Rabbi Zaiman from Temple Emanu-El, and Rabbi Leslie Guterman from Temple Beth-El. The bringing together of three parts of the community was very gratifying.

What Has Stuck with Me, Fifty Years Later

In 1974, I left Providence to attend Yale, and I earned my graduate degrees at M.I.T. I am no longer at all observant. I go to shul only sporadically. I have not read Torah in shul since 1987. I have not studied a page of Talmud since 1977. I have been married to a wonderful woman since 1983, but because we had no children, we did not have to decide how they should be educated and brought up.

Nonetheless, my early Jewish education remains an essential part of my life, my activities, and my outlook on life. I am also still in touch with a few of my classmates from the Hebrew Day School.

I vividly remember the prayers, songs, and many passages of *Humash* that I learned for my Torah reading. My Hebrew remains good enough that I was able to follow and enjoy the delightful series of classical music interviews, “Intermezzo with Arik” from Israeli educational television.

After Robert Alter’s extraordinary translation of the Hebrew Bible was published in 2018, I worked through it verse-by-verse from Genesis to Chronicles, in English and Hebrew. I take great pleasure from talking Torah, in both the narrow sense and the broad sense of Jewish thought, tradition, and culture, with my family and friends, including friends on social media.

My views of the world in many respects bear, indelibly, the stamp of the Jewish tradition and the Jewish texts that I learned from my teachers when I was young.

Overall

In 1912, my grandfather, Louis Finkelstein, then 17-years-old, had applied to study at the Jewish Theological Seminary. At this time, the Seminary had fewer than a dozen faculty members, and applicants were interviewed by the president, Solomon Schechter. He asked Grandpa, “Why do you want to come to the Seminary?” Grandpa answered, naturally, “To learn; to study Torah.” “No, Mr. Finkelstein,” said Schechter. “You come to associate with great men.”

In that spirit, I conclude this note by remembering with thanks my dedicated teachers, great men and women, who so much enriched my life, and the Providence Jewish community and institutions, which enabled my Jewish education.

ⁱ My father wrote numerous personal memoirs. These, and other family histories, can be found on my website: <https://cs.nyu.edu/~ed1/personal>

ⁱⁱ <https://cs.nyu.edu/~davise/personal/Gewirtz/GewirtzMelodies.html>