

HEBREW UNION COLLEGE
"GRADUATION ADDRESS 2005"
INTERVIEW WITH MARK & PEACHY LEVY

MARK LEVY:

There's no way to thank Richard except to say thank you. And I also wanna add my name to the list of people that have been mentored by Steve Brewer. I had a brief career as a temple administrator and I turned to Steve day after day after day.

At the hotel where we stay in New York apparently named The Mark printed next to my name on the registration form was always the word "retired." Most recently I noted that the designation had changed. It now says "philanthropist."

How that change came about I have no idea. But it started me thinking about how I am named. Does support of community institutions merit such a lofty name? After all isn't this what we Jews are commanded to do?

As I thought further, I think that if I were to fill out a questionnaire today about a title, a name, what I would use is collector. Peachy and I are collectors, collectors of Jewish ritual objects, antique and contemporary from as many times and as many communities as we can gather. Menorahs, spice boxes, sadaka boxes, holders for megilot and mezuzot, some silver, some brass, some made of olive wood from the ancient trees in Eretz-Israel. Ritual objects marked Jerusalem.

All of these objects are or have been silent witnesses to times of happiness and horror, to times of victory and defeat. They are historic documents. They are the prisms through which we view Jewish life.

These objects are all monuments, things that remind, markers that by their survival commemorate an action, a period, an event, a way of life, a people, all of us.

Commemoration honors a memory without which there is no continuity, no history, no survival. The creation of these objects is an act of imagination, addressed to its tradition to a community. We are that community. We are all survivors of that tradition. We are all part of our collection.

Each object holds and validates memory, and that's what we're about. These objects are clay kodesh (SIC), vessels of holiness, as we are clay kodesh, vessels who carry on Jewish life. Monuments, survival, commemoration, memory, a collection.

Rabbi Bill Cutter introduced us to a new way to think about our collection. He brought many of you, his students, to our home, and allowed us to join and study with you, surrounded by our clay kodesh. We read together the words of the poet, Yahuda Amichai as he gazed upon the collection in the Israel Museum.

Amichai wrote: "Spice boxes with little flags on top and fragrant generations of sacrifice and happy menorahs and weepy menorahs and oil lamps and long, metal hands to point out everything that is no more. Kiddush cups in a row on a shelf like soccer trophies. All is gold of grief, silver of longing, copper of calamity, a collection of our ritual objects, the gift of our aged nation. And whoever hears this will assume a delicate smile on his lips like well wrought filigree. So collecting is the metaphor for who we are. We treasure all of the collections in our lives. We treasure family, friends, communities, names. We treasure the repositories of our collections. Our synagogues, our home, the centers of our communities, our museums, our Jewish institutions.

Together Peachy and I have been building a collection for 56 years, and I've been working on mine for almost 80 years. I was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1926, named for two great grandfathers both named Meyir.

A Pirate fan from birth to American parents and grandparents from Lithuania, Germany and Alsace. I began building my collection of ancestors through the study of these communities with some seven years of Jewish genealogy taught to me by Rabbi Leonard Thall.

Through our travels to Germany, Alsace, Belgium, England, Israel, New York and Chicago, Peachy and I met relatives and added names, names I had never heard. Metzger, Strauss, Heinemann. But I also added names that I was familiar with. Westerbork, Terezenstadt, Auschwitz.

Cousin Judy and Uncle Joseph survived Westerbork and Terezenstadt. Cousins Hugo, Walter and Truda perished in Auschwitz. These discoveries became a commemoration of my Jewish past, stories, hidden stories, laughter, tears, family photos, a collection, a new, old community and the stirring of memories.

Because my father worked for many different department stores, we lived in Pittsburgh, New York, Canton, Ohio, Cumberland, Maryland, St. Louis where I became a Cardinal fan, back to Pittsburgh and the Pirates, and finally in 1940 to Los Angeles, the Hollywood stars and eventually the Dodgers. The collection grew. So many homes. So many schools. So many friends. And more and more memories.

Along the way, my first collection was small, glass animals, and then of course baseball cards. Those of us males of a certain age all ask the same question: What did my mother do with my baseball cards? Why did she get rid of them? Do you know what a Ducky Medwick card from 1935 would be worth today?

And I collected friends, some long gone, most long forgotten, but in my collective memory the names, Cooperman, Dauzel, Hartman, Ginsberg are all part of the tapestry of my life, part of my collection.

Arriving in Los Angeles in 1940, along the way my Jewish community was fragmented at best. There was Rodoshul and Sunday school in Pittsburgh and the start of Hebrew School at Share Emeth

in St. Louis, but little or no home observance. The only home observance really was when Bubby Levine came to live with us and she lit Shabbas candles.

But we always lived in a Jewish neighborhood. Squirrel Hill in Pittsburgh. University City in St. Louis. And we settled at 1026 South LaJolla in Los Angeles. Time to begin a new collection. L.A. High. UCLA. And new names to add to my community, Kaufman, Lebowsky, Greenberg, Bronstein and so many more.

On December 7th, 1941, I rode my bike to a delicatessen on Fairfax to pick up bagels and lox. Who said we weren't observant? That was our Sunday morning ritual. It was in that delicatessen that I heard about Pearl Harbor. What was it? Where was it? How would that time and place enter in to my memories? Soon there were no more Japanese American kids in school. A whole community lost to us. How could that happen? We were soon to find out.

In 1943, I began my entry into a very new community, a new tradition. Minhag United States Army from private to corporal to second lieutenant to first lieutenant, I now had a series of new names to add to the collection.

And the new communities became Fort Knox, Fort Benning, Camp Lucky Strike. The Fourth Armored Division, The 37th Tank Battalion, France, Germany and Czechoslovakia. And the names changed. The new names were fellow soldiers. Montford, Duff, Pancake, Gilston. My tank crew was Salvagio, Brown, Laurey And Thompson and even my tank had a name. It was called Thunderbolt. Add Dachau and the D.P. camps to that list of names and places.

I feel proud to have served during that war in Europe. I returned to UCLA after the war, and I met the new name, the jewel in my collection, the love of my life, Peachy Kaufman. (APPLAUSE)

We met on the library steps at UCLA and she soon became Peachy Levy. And then soon we had our own community, Richard, Janet and John, and our entry into Jewish life and the start of our new Jewish community, Temple Emmanuel of Beverly Hills, Brandeis Camp, The United Welfare Fund, and of course, the community service committee. This was a training ground for young to become Jewish leaders. How can you build a collection, a community without service? It was a lesson well taught.

For all of this new community, the beginning of a new collection, what became most important was the synagogue and its supporting institutions. They are the repositories of our shared values, our memories. Temple Emmanuel. Leo Baeck Temple. Hebrew Union College. Valley Beth Shalom. Hillel Federation. The then UAHC. Each in its unique way standing for something special. Prayer, social action, education, caring.

The leaders of these institutions, many of whom are here today, have helped create memories for us. We were among the Jewish tourists who went to the Soviet Union as clandestine envoys of Zionism and Jewish culture. We carried materials, concealed in our language and in our coats which we

handed over to active refuseniks whom we met in secret encounter. We were there to help a community escape to freedom, to Israel, a new Jewish life, a new community.

Now we have a relatively new, young community, a new collection. Many thousands of young Jews who continue to receive scholarships to Jewish camps, NIFTI and Israel programs through a family scholarship that we've established. More new names, Newman, Swig, Kutz, Eahi. All these young Jews' right to share with us their joy and excitement at being in their favorite Jewish community and what it means to them.

Through their letters, each of them tells us about the friendships that they're making, friends for life, and the memories that they will take with them. Anot Hoffman who was the director of the Israel Religious Action Center calls these young Jews, our collection of smiles.

Some parts of our collection have been lost. These memories are painful. The loss of parents, family, friends and teachers. Through our own illnesses and surgeries in recent years, Peachy and I have added to the collection names of physicians and surgeons.

As our teacher Rabbi Harold Schulweiss has written, "Our community understands the healing power of letters. Get well cards, visits and misheberachs, the prayer for recovery." All of these we have added to our collection, our collection of blessings.

As the result of the illness and death of our father, Irving Kaufman, an extraordinary healing community arose. The Kaufman Institute on Judaism and Health. We know the that impact Rabbi Bill Cutter's vision and creativity has been transforming for so many of you. We have added the institute and Bill Cutter to our collection of blessings. Bill, we are so grateful to you. (APPLAUSE)

We visited Israel for the first time in 1959 just the two of us, carefully shepherded by representatives of the then United Jewish Welfare Fund, a new community in every sense of the word from the Maabarot in Quonset huts to the Mandelbaum Gate guarded by Jordanian soldiers.

We were like sponges and it was beshert that we would acquire an object, a commemoration of who we were and where we were. As we walked along Dizengoff Street in Tel Aviv, we stopped in front of a tiny jewelry store. On a shelf in the back, we saw it. Like the only kid from the Haggadah, a brass Hanukkah menorah standing alone, one of a kind, a unique commemoration, probably brought to Israel from Europe.

We didn't know. We couldn't ever have imagined that years later it would stand surrounded by many hundreds of objects in our home, objects of memory, monument, commemoration, our clay kodesh.

Our Judaica collection continues to grow. Only last week, we added a pair of elegant silver (UNINTEL) from Amsterdam, dated 1780. What was it like to be a Jew in that community, in that time? If only those objects could talk, what would they have to tell us? Memories lost forever.

Our family collection has grown also. Our grandchildren, Alexandra, Jacob, Kate, Jeremy, Nathaniel, and Abigail. What will it be like to be a Jew in their communities? What will their memories become? And will those memories be saved?

So, what has this tale of collections, memories, monuments, commemoration and grandchildren to do with you, our graduates? As you enter into the world of Jewish life as professionals, I believe that you will, and I hope that you will over time, become the recipients of many of these collective memories. These collections of people, places, objects.

Take them seriously. Take them in to your heart. Build them into your lives. Become collectors. Become care-takers. Become curators of clay kodesh. (HEBREW NOT TRANSCRIBED) May it be God's will.

PEACHY LEVY:

It was pretty daunting to be invited to speak to a group of graduates of the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion who represent the future of liberal Judaism. The first thing I did was to look at my calendar. Perhaps I was busy that day.

But then with the realization of the honor to address you, esteemed graduates and honorees, again I looked at my calendar this time to find the Parsah Tashavua, the weekly Torah portion, to see what wisdom was waiting for me. In Parsha Bahar, I was greeted with the proclamation that Adonai made to Moses about the Sabbath of the land every seven years and the jubilee year to celebrate seven times seven years, ukraten droba aritz. Proclaim liberty throughout the land.

It is the proclamation that we know is written on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia. It is also the subject of the Torah mantle that I made that is displayed at the entrance of the Skirba Museum core collection. A coincidence? I don't think so. I wasn't really surprised that this Torah portion had a special meaning for me at this moment and in this place as we begin to celebrate 50 years.

It is just one more example of what my friend Rabbi Larry Kushner calls the invisible lines of connection. But to recognize those lines takes education and experience. When Mark and I were first awakened to the idea of having an actively Jewish home, we were at a beginners' weekend to experience Shabbat with a brilliant educator, Dr. Schlomo Bardien of Blessed Memory. When the weekend was over, we were strongly encouraged to take all we had learned, make Shabbat in our homes, buy a formidable stack of books of Jewish books that we were informed we must have on our shelves if we were ever to read them. And make sure that our beautiful homes looked beautifully Jewish.

It was an exciting prospect, making Shabbat. And I was immediately full of theological questions. Schlomo's reply was, "Just do Shabbat. The rest will come." The idea of doing Shabbat on our very own was very nervous-making for two Jews with little experience, three young children to educate and no Jewish knowledge.

Mark's mother gave us her mother's brass Shabbas candlesticks, so there was a touch of memory from another generation but nothing either of us had ever experienced at home. I clearly remember being embarrassed as I stood at one end of the table in front of our young children who trusted us to know what we were doing. And with the help of Max Healthman's record, I lit the two candles and chanted the blessing. Mark led the Kiddish In Mozi. And I think we blessed our children.

That was the moment when we began to become creators of memory. That was the beginning of connection. The rest has surely come. I remember very clearly a sense of belonging with Jews throughout the world with whom I now share the experience of Shabbat. We had put ourselves into a moment of history and now we were part of that story.

That is a feeling that has only grown with the years. I recently read an article in the Union For Reformed Judaism magazine called *Reformed Judaism* that describes the journey of Eastern European Jews into a Jewish life that many are too young to have ever known. Yet somehow they have a sense of the tradition of generations who came before them who were deprived of their heritage, which urges them to explore, discover and become the new Jewish community in their part of the world.

I can imagine the excitement and maybe the self-consciousness they must feel as they welcome Shabbat, as they bless Shabbas candles and chant Kiddich In Mozi for the first time. As the years have gone on, Mark and I have embraced the tradition more fully, become more learned and have been enriched beyond all measure.

And were is so wonderful is that we live in a time when it's possible to experience this transformation, this journey within our own reform movement. Life is more significant for us when woven into the Jewish calendar. Shabbat holiday and festival observance make us feel the separation of holy times from the more ordinary. And having guests on those occasions has become the way we entertain. But equally important, the liturgies of those occasions insist that we look at the inherent values of our celebration and job our consciences to ensure that we do not only recite blessings. We could say, "Dayanu, isn't it enough that we celebrate these holidays and holy times?"

But, no, our tradition says it's not what we say but what we do. For me, it is important to say and to do. I think that is what our tradition expects of each of us. That is where I find spiritual nourishment and where the invisible lines of connection reside. It has been essential to us to enrich our minds as well as our souls with study.

We are fully aware of our good fortune to live in a city filled with Jewish scholarship. We have used this opportunity to study through the years with many scholars of note, some of who are here today. Currently we are part of a group lucky enough to study with your own Dr. Tamara Escanozi, who brings such wisdom into our lives. We love the years when Tamara and her darling Bill Wedby, halav a shalom, taught us together.

I have been studying Hebrew for many years, and I love it. While I have yet so much to learn, I feel more closely connected to Torah, to Israel, to literature and to music. Three other women and I study

weekly with our teacher Ora Band, who brings us all of the intricacies of Hebrew word structure. As she so kindly corrects our grammar when we share our ma asai hashva vaa. Our stories and doings of the past week.

And then we delve into Hebrew literature, albeit on our level, with great enthusiasm. It hasn't all been study. Each of us has been involved in the community in different ways in our synagogue, at the federation, at the Union for Reform Judaism and Mazon. At the Skirbal and the Hebrew Union College and Hillel. We travel to the Soviet Union to visit Refuseniks. And I became active in the 35s, a women's campaign to save Soviet Jews.

From that experience, it wasn't too much of a leap to ride horseback in the Simian Mountains on the first mission from the North American Jewish Community to observe and evaluate the plight of Jews in Ethiopia. I became a founding member of NACOEJ, the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, started by my roommate on that trip, Barbara Ripakov Gordon.

And, sadly, 24 years later, we're still trying to solve the problems. With all this involvement in Jewish life, there was a time when we felt an absence of the spiritual in our daily lives. We consciously acknowledge our Jewishness each Ariv Shabbat. But there came a time when we needed more. We asked ourselves: What do we do daily more than anything else? That's easy. We eat. We three times a day we eat. In addition, we make lists of food we need. We mark it, put the food away and finally cook. It seemed quite obvious that Kashrut, a clearly identifying expression of Jewish life, could be a consideration.

How do two people who are striving to live committed Jewish lives yet not Halachachly bound to all Mitzvoh make choices that bring them closer to God and give them spiritual sustenance? Our friend Rabbi Richard Levy suggests that perhaps the acts choose us. I don't want you to think this was an easy decision. We had been married for over 20 years, had a well-established lifestyle and a lot of valuable table possessions that had to be considered.

Without going into details, let me say that we spent many months talking, studying and getting rabbinic insight. We made our decision to before Kashrid into our lives and were in for a complete surprise. We had anticipated a change in our consciousness. But what we hadn't anticipated was the change in how we felt about our home. It became a micdashma at, a small sanctuary, a holy place.

I cannot explain it. After all, this was already a Jewish home, a place of blessings, of Shabbat, of sidaka, of teaching our children, of meetings, of study. I can only tell you that we were urged to make the right decision for ourselves. Kashrid has put us in touch with much more than food. It touches on history, hospitality, compassion and a sense of the sacred.

And, once again, we felt the connections to the wider Jewish community, both historically and in our present world. The hardest part was explaining to friends and family. My father, olov ha shalom, who never experienced Kashrid after leaving his parents' home as a young man, would always say with tears in his eyes, "If only my mother could see that her Anaka, her granddaughter, is keeping

kosher."

Another life-changing experience happened to me on this journey. I took a class in embroidery so that I could make a Challa cover that was suitable to grace our Shabbat table. It was time to retire what one of our children had made in religious school. So I learned the art of embroidery, made a Challa cover, made more for other people.

And so it went until one day a rabbi asked me if I would like to make Torah mantles for his synagogue. Somehow, I had the chutzpah to say yes. And that was the beginning of what has become a rewarding career. And I mean that in a spiritual sense. I needed to express my passion for Judaism and particularly for Jewish values. And Judaic Textiles became a fulfilling vehicle. I could make my own visual Midrashim and, at the same time, enhance the religious experience for other Jews, hitor mitzvah.

It is a gift that I cherished. Could I have imagined that I would ever see new rabbis being ordained under a chupah that I had made? Did I ever think that my work could be in the core collection of the Skirbo Museum? But there it is. Just yesterday, once again, newly ordained rabbis received their smickah and blessing under the chupah I had created especially for that occasion.

And a Torah mantle with the theme of this Parasha Tashavua graces the opening of the Skirbo Museum. Small miracles. I have only mentioned our precious family in passing as recipients of our Jewish heritage, learned in our home and in our synagogue. What I haven't said is how they have transmitted that heritage to their children, our beloved grandchildren, whose lives already reflect the Jewish wisdom they have learned. I feel that God needs me in this partnership of covenant. Each of us hears God in different ways. And some of us at different times of our lives.

What matters is how we respond, how we interact with other human beings, how we work to repair this gift of creation. Rabbi Harold Schulweif says it best: "God is not in me, not in you but between us." The Balshamtov once said to his followers: "The object of the whole Torah is that a person should become a Torah." That is the lifetime work of each of us.

The Torah that you graduates are becoming will help to guide the people in the communities that each of you will serve so that they, too, will become a Torah. To all of you, Mazal Tov. May you be blessed with wisdom and compassion in the work that you will do. And may your lives bring blessings into a needy world.