

A Jew in Full

by [Ehud Neor](#) (December 2024)



Learning Talmud (Samuel Hirszenberg, 1887)

Twice in my life I have been astounded by freely given declarations shot out loudly into the ether, boldly, without hesitation, like bolts of human truth hurled back towards the mount of the feckless gods, echoing Father Abraham in proclaiming: Here I stand! Both times I was shaken by the intensity of the truth-ridden utterance, shoved out of my zone of comfort, forced into new realizations. Those declarations sounded as rams' horns that awakened my soul when I heard them, and still they awaken it, twin pillars of enlightenment echoing at the entrance to my inner temple. I cherish the memory of them, and I hope that I have lived a life worthy of one who has heard, and who has paid attention. I have dealt with the most recent of these declarations in "[Blessing Israel](#)."

The earlier declaration had its humble beginnings in a small liberal arts college in Crawfordsville, Indiana. When I attended Wabash College in the 70's, there were about 800 male students, and 800 students overall. To this day it remains one of the few non-coed colleges in the US. The reality of not having the female form factor in play meant that—unless one got his kicks from drinking seemingly endless kegs of beer—weekends were spent studying. For me that meant reading, mostly. Catching up with the Western Canon. I was somewhat of an odd fish, coming from New England. There were less than ten of us, maybe less than five. I remember two from Maine and one other from Massachusetts. We dressed alike—sloppily—and spoke alike, and that set us apart from a campus that consisted of mostly students from Indiana, whose long hair never reached their shoulders.

I came to Wabash clueless. To begin with, eighty-five percent of the students belonged to fraternities, and lived in separate dorms—in reality large homes set up as dorms—where they ate, slept and studied, and bonded under the three letters of the Greek alphabet engraved over the entrance to the building. Over the first week or so, Freshmen are “rushed,” or recruited, by the fraternities. Each fraternity had its own traditions and qualities. Superficially, each had a public-facing reputation. One was for geeks, one for athletes, one for partiers. I was not rushed. It took months before a friendly soul explained to me that in a school where nearly everyone belonged to a fraternity, not being rushed is to be seen as a snub. All I remember when looking in to the issue upon my arrival was that I was told that there was an option to be an “Independent,” and for me that was the end of the story. If the term for not living in a fraternity had been, for example, “non-affiliated,” I may have continued asking around to understand what it took to become affiliated. As it was, “Independent” was right for me from the start.

I was indeed independent, and I took advantage of that. Most

classes were small and intimate, and even the larger survey type classes retained that intimacy. Wabash celebrated the tutorial, the symposium. I soon learned the secret for academic success: do the work on time and always read more than the course requirements and be prepared for class. And although I was a vocal proponent of Wabash "going co-ed," as I deemed it to be "unnatural" to be studying in an all-male environment, even then I knew that I was doing much more studying than I would have done had there been a female presence in the classroom. That's just the way it is.

One Friday evening during my sophomore year, an acquaintance dropped by and said to me out of the blue: "Do you want to come over to my place and hear Kiddush?" I had no idea what he was talking about.

"I'm Jewish, you know."

I had not known, or if I did know I had not assigned any particular significance to the fact, and his mentioning it at that point made no impression on me. I had other concerns. At that stage in life I was a know-it-all and I was flustered that I did not know what a kiddush was. My friend, a future magna cum laude graduate, knew me well enough to know that about me and had devised an eloquent little mind game for me. At least that's what I was thinking. In reality he was just being nice.

He knew that I knew the word "kaddish." He knew that because we both had taken some literature classes and at that time, in that place, at our age, literature meant "The Beats," and they included Alan Ginsberg and his poem "Kaddish." I thought that the kaddish was a sort of Jewish death dirge. I was right, and though death is not mentioned in the kaddish of Jewish liturgy, it is recited at funerals by mourners. Since we saw Ginsberg as a rebel, I instinctively knew that his "Kaddish" was in some way a rebellion against the Jewish kaddish.

So kiddush. I understood that it was different from kaddish, but I also sensed that there had to be some connection. While these gears were grinding in my head, my friend stood there, smiling, waiting for an answer. I could either ask him what is kiddush, or I could do what I did:

“So, kiddush it is. After you.”

It was an unbalanced walk over to his dorm room, me not knowing what kaddish was and him knowing that I did not know but was too proud to admit it. For my part, I was thinking that this whole trip better be good because we were leaving behind a keg of free beer in my dorm’s laundry room, and also, I was starting to get the feeling that there might be a gay component to this invitation. Bummer.

But I needn’t have worried. It was a beautiful experience. He patiently explained to me the rituals that he was performing. There was a moment when he turned out the lights and said the blessing over the Shabbat candles that gave me a gay-pause moment, but that passed quickly, and I give my young self credit for accepting his offering—for that is what it was, a glimpse into Jewish culture—and in so doing, I opened the door to one of the seminal experiences of my life.

He filled a silver goblet with wine, and looking into a book he began reciting a blessing. Feeling some kind of secret knowledge floating in the air, I eased forward to get a look at what he was reading. As he continued with the blessing my mind began to race. I could not understand a word of what he was saying, but instinctively I knew that I was in the presence of something that I did know, a text-based belief known by me at that time as the Old Testament.

My knowledge was new, and relatively rigorous for a college sophomore. The backstory to this is my leaving the protestant faith of my birth and childhood. This happened precisely during the time when President Jimmy Carter pronounced himself

a "born-again Christian." I was a self-aborted Christian, not able to stand up to the general post-hippie world of anything goes, and not able to insert the square peg of promiscuity into the round hole of Protestantism. I was a dangling peg, so to speak, eventually drifting over to some abstract brain construct of ancient aliens and Chariots of the Gods.

Which was very flippant of me, as I well knew. It was in that state of mind that I chose my courses for my freshman year. One semester of Old Testament, One semester of New Testament, and another class on the Hebrew Prophets. I felt that I had an obligation to my family, near and far, and to my ancestors, that if I were leaving the faith, I would do so knowing what that faith was. Though I spent much of my freshman year with a bible opened on my desk, my grades in those courses ranged between B- and B+. I realized early on that I was waging some sort of emotional battle with the ancient texts, as if I were saying: "prove it!" This prevented me from dealing with the sources on their own terms, as did my nagging habit of searching for clues of ancient aliens in the Bible. I needed a 12-step program from AAA. Ancient Aliens Anonymous.

I found an alternative program to religious belief that took seed during the second semester of that freshman year. That program was called European Literature in translation. Existentialism, Art, Creativity. I had found a step-bridge over the Void. I could again ponder existence without dread, no Supreme Being needed. I set sail in that three-masted ship, master of my own helm, with a full wind at my back, unknowingly headed straight for the rocks of Nihilism, where I would run aground and re-learn humility.

And find myself in the dorm room of a dear friend named Bill Berg, listening to him chant an ancient passage in the language of the Prophets. What was it that I was hearing? More to the point: what was I seeing? I looked at the page from which he had been reading. I saw three columns. I asked about them. He was somewhat taken aback by my enthusiasm.

"The column on the right is the original Hebrew. The column on the left is the English translation, and the column in the middle is an English transliteration of the Hebrew. That's what I was reading."

"Do you know Hebrew?"

"I can read and understand basic Hebrew. I had to learn for my bar mitzva."

I was thinking: "So that is what Hebrew sounds like."

I could not take my eyes off this miraculous page. It was a Rosetta Stone for me. Looking from the English to the Hebrew I felt as if I were leapfrogging over a wall of late 19th century protestant commentary on the Hebrew scriptures, which was the basis for my studies the previous year. Here before me was the real thing. I felt as if I were in the presence of holiness, and I did not hide it. Bill had no idea as to the spirit that engulfed me, that had been released by his recital. Leapfrog is the word, because I felt as if I had leapfrogged over entire libraries of irrelevant commentary and landed flat dab in the middle of a patch of Hebrew bushes. My attitude was: "Well what have we here?" Because I was so excited and animated, he told me later, he thought at first that I was making fun of him, ridiculing Judaism. When he realized that I was being honest in my reaction, he must have thought that he was in the presence of a religious zealot, or in the presence of a simple kook. I was certainly acting like one. I bombarded him with questions about Judaism, in particular, about his Judaism. He made it clear that his relationship to his Jewish heritage was like my relationship to my Protestant heritage. We were just a couple of guys, sailing together on a trip to the promised land of Literature and artistic Truth, which was proving not to be a three-masted ship, rather, a small ketch, and I was standing up in the bow, shifting my weight, rocking the boat. A normal person would realize that he was endangering the whole endeavor with his

actions and would have settled down in consideration of his traveling partner. I did not do the simple thing and stop rocking the boat; I dove into the sea. Within a year of that fateful meeting in my friend's dorm room, I was in the land where Hebrew was spoken, by Rabbis at their pulpits and by children calling to their pet dogs in the street, and by Hebrew speaking sailors cursing over their beers down in the Haifa port area. Quite the patch of Hebrew bushes. The bushes in my mind's eye may not have been burning, but my answer to this vision was as Moses's: "I stand here ready."

The next time I heard from my friend Bill was through an aerogram. These were pre-paid light weight blue-tinted pieces of paper that could be written on and then folded and sealed using tongue-lick adhesive tabs, forming a letter. It was the cheapest way to send a letter overseas. There was one rule, however: nothing besides the sheet of paper itself could be attached, meaning no inserts at all. No extra page of correspondence. Nothing. This is why I immediately panicked when I received an aerogram from Bill with a suspicious bulge. By feel, I knew what it was, but I couldn't imagine him doing this. I had a flashback to the time when I first arrived in Israel, and upon exiting the TWA jet, paused for a moment like a visiting dignitary to survey my surroundings. The plane was strangely parked far from the terminal, and there was an armed uniformed soldier near the base of the steps. Was he going to walk us to the terminal? Was the entire passenger list under suspicion? I was just as stricken by the fact that none of this seemed to be bothering anyone else. So I became a sheep and stepped down on the tarmac, relieved to see that a bus had arrived to take us to the terminal, and less relieved at the blowout-sale rush to be on the first bus. That was my first experience with the Israeli elbow, and it was to be far from the last.

It wasn't the Israeli elbow that concerned me while I was holding the aerogram. I was concerned with my feeling that at

any moment an armed Israeli soldier would be bursting into my dorm room to arrest me and confiscate what I knew was illegal contraband. Yes, my college friend had stuffed a joint into the aerogram. I was afraid to open it and held onto it like I was holding someone else's soiled underwear. What was I going to do? Return it to the post office? Go to the police? Would I be turning myself in if the envelope remained unopened? Will I be handcuffed and arrested? All this was going through my head when the solution to my dilemma presented himself.

"What's that you have there?" said my roommate, Mr. Emeka Iwuoha, who lay on his bed reading one of my books. He was an exchange student from Nigeria, of the Ibo tribe (today known as Igbo). I told him what I thought was dangling from my hand.

"Open it straight away, my man!" Emeka, who spoke excellent English, was making his way systematically through my collection of novels and would playfully adopt the voices of characters who caught his fancy. He would lay on his bed, reading for hours, then suddenly close the book and pronounce: "I fancy a trip to the WC. Would you care to join me, sir?" It became a long-running private joke between us. Especially when we were in company. His goal was to get me to break out into maniacal laughter for no apparent reason to those present. If, for example, he would spy a female student who caught his attention, and she might chance to look our way, he would lean in and whisper loudly "shiver me timbers!" It reached the point that in a case like that, unless someone was looking directly at me, they would not know that I was laughing, because all of the air had been sucked out of my lungs, and there remained aught but me shivering timbers.

I opened the aerogram and tossed him the joint which he smoked, straight away, a copy of *Crime and Punishment* splayed across his midsection. Once I saw that the evidence would soon be gone, I managed to calm myself, only to discover another layer of dark dread. This was an existential dread, and not the last to fall upon me in that room. I was not looking

forward to reading what Bill had to say. Because I knew that it must earmark the measure of separation from my previous life, one that, at that moment in time, I intended to resume at least for the academic year it would take me to finish my BA. I brought with me homework. As a true seaman alighting from the ship Modern Novel, I had brought my books along in a duffle bag, a library now serving two sailors: Emeka and me. He read the books after me and would stop when he reached some passage that I had marked, and a discussion would begin. He was one of the most intelligent men I have ever known, Jewish or not. I quickly realized that he was deciphering me through those notes, trying to understand me as much as he might be trying to understand "Lord Jim." His questions were so thoughtful that I began to prepare my replies to him as I marked up a book I was reading. More importantly, I began to mark passages that I thought were important for us to discuss; Emeka had become a part of my reading. In this way, I was becoming a teacher, as was Emeka.

Our relationship was not too different from the one that had been developing between Bill and I. In both cases, the native intelligence of my friends was superior to mine. At first, with Bill, I did not think this to be the case. As a matter of fact, at the time I did not think that I had an intellectual equal among the student body at Wabash (oh the young hubris!). There were more learned—many more—but in my mind I was doing my time in the college equivalent of baseball's minor leagues. I was a raw talent needing a final polishing before breaking out in the major leagues. I saw myself as an All-Star when I would return to Wabash for my senior year. In the end, it was Bill who would be the All-Star at Wabash, and, reading my novels in my dorm at Haifa University with my Nigerian foil, I began to realize that Bill had been purposefully modest when in discussion with me. One might think that he had been desperate for friendship, but I knew that not to be true. He was a well-regarded member of the swim team and as well-adjusted and as sociable as one could be in that environment.

What then could explain his reaching out to me, of all his friends? Whatever the reason, it led to his inviting me to Kiddush, and today I regard that Friday night as a fortuitous encounter like the biblical Joseph's encounter with the mysterious stranger while searching for his brothers, an encounter that changed the course of Jewish history, as the encounter with Hebrew on that page changed the course of my own history.

As I was reading the novels from my sea chest and making notes, I was noticing in passing that Bill was also present in those readings. I would read a passage and remember that Bill had once made a comment on this same passage. Or had he? Regardless of whether he had or not, I was hearing Bill's voice as I read the classics and that brought home to me—and how it pained me and pleased me to admit it—that Bill had mastered literature in a manner that I was not sure I could match. So it wasn't really with a premonition that I began reading his aerogram. It was with a full, ripe knowledge that I had been left behind. I do not remember much of the details of the letter, but I do remember him mentioning his excitement about reading Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*. In the space of one paragraph he criticized, praised and finally beatified Musil, all while knowing that I had not read the book. He would have been pleased to know that I had never even heard of the book, or its author. That's not quite fair, really, as though the above is probably true, Bill's obvious intent was to engender excitement, to show me what I was missing, and to entice me back to Wabash for my senior year so we could learn literature together.

So why the inner pain, why the sadness? Because I was a man in transition. I had seen enough, had heard enough, and had learned enough to know that my future lay in the direction of Judaism and Zionism. Until that letter from Bill, I had not thought that I might soon be pressed to make a choice between one or the other, indeed, I was confident that I would still

return to Wabash as a—how shall I put it—minor Hebrew hero, but it was precisely when I was reading the letter that it became clear to me that if a choice had to be made, I would not be returning to Crawfordsville, Indiana. I still intended to return for my final year, but I now knew that there was a possibility that I would not.

Another year passed and I received word that Bill was coming to Israel for a visit. Bill had graduated magna cum laude from Wabash and was to enter law school at Emory the coming fall. How can I put it? He was living the life that I had imagined for myself. I did not begrudge Bill his success. I expected such success from him as he expected a similar result for me. He showed true concern when it became clear from talking to me that I did not seem to be moving successfully in any direction at all and gave me some thoughtful advice, not the first time in my life that I received good advice and proceeded to ignore it. Bill suggested that I reverse my orientation. Instead of keeping Wabash on hold, I should put whatever I was doing in Israel on hold and return to Wabash to finish my BA, and if I so desired, return to Israel to continue where I had left off.

It's hard to argue with good logic, and I didn't, but the path I had chosen, with no measurable milestones except the final one when I would take a dip in a ritual bath, was not something one puts on hold. Solid in my conviction, still, I knew that if I were in Bill's place and he in mine, I would have been even more aggressive in my attempt to bring him back on the well-trodden track. Bill's was a silent adjuring, no less effective than my imaginary bullying. At the time my thinking was that he would come around sooner or later. He had to have some sort of visceral understanding of what I was trying to do. He was, after all. Jewish.

Embarrassingly, I took it upon myself to help Bill come around. I would help him see the light. He himself provided the perfect opportunity for that when he produced two tickets for a play at the amphitheater in Caesarea. This is a

beautiful venue in the summer with the Mediterranean Sea as a backdrop to the stage, with the sea breeze carrying the sounds from the stage to the audience. The amphitheater was reconstructed from the ruins of the Roman original that was built by King Herod. The play was *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes. It was to be presented in modern Greek, with the audience wearing headphones for simultaneous translation. I knew the play and thought that it had likely also been produced at the time of the despotic Herod. Here was a King of questionable Jewish lineage, kept in power by Roman interests, always favoring Roman culture when it conflicted with Jewish culture. This was so marked that the two antagonistic Jewish factions of the time, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, at odds over almost everything else, were united in their opposition to him.

What was I thinking? Was I adopting the pose of a Pharisee, setting up my own morality play within a play? I'm not sure. The truth is that at the time I did not feel threatened by the influence of the Greeks. I was a student of the greatest Jewish thinker, Maimonides, who himself had been a student of Aristotle. My attitude towards competitive cultures was take the best and leave the rest. Bill and I travelled to Caesarea from Haifa on chartered buses and made sure that we knew where to gather for the return trip. It was a beautiful evening and as we climbed to our seats, I was receptive to what I hoped would be a memorable cultural event.

It started out poorly, the male chorus raucous not reflective, boisterous and pushy, thus, not to be trusted. As the play developed, it seemed to me somewhat of a streetwise Aristophanes. Not lulled by the premise of the production, but still wanting it to succeed for the sake of both Bill and me, I tried to see this new production as a modern Greek attempt to create a "West Side Story" for *Lysistrata*. The male actors were lunging through their paces like daggers, stomping on the stage to accent their lines. There was an overall grossness to

the play, and sensing that, I should have not been surprised when it revealed itself to be a one trick production.

Oh yes, how do we portray a male who has been denied sex? Innuendo? A covered, suggestive bulge? Not with this group. The full appendage was there for all to see, front and center on each male player. I was repulsed, and was thinking "what's the point," which was silly of me because the point that I was seeing was the point. Those grotesque monstrosities stole the show, and Bill, along with the entire audience were laughing hysterically. Had I become a prude? Out of fear of that, I sat through the rest of the play. The troupe received a standing ovation. I do not remember if they took their bow with their props.

Leaving the amphitheater my mind was racing. Was I supposed to have enjoyed that, or at least respect what I had seen in a cultural sense? The more I thought about it, the more muddled my thinking became. Perhaps because of this—mind going astray, body follows—I was not able to locate our bus. There had been an announcement in Hebrew at the end of the play and I started thinking that I may have missed something. One thing I knew for certain, the bus would not wait for a couple of American students. No-one would volunteer to walk the couple of hundred yards to the original pick-up spot to see if we were there. The parking area was adjacent to the ruins of the colosseum and when I looked at the opposite end to where we were standing, I could see busses starting to pull away.

Bill said sensibly: "Maybe our bus is over there."

I answered: "No, it is supposed to be here, let's wait."

If we had made a run for it when Bill suggested, we might have made it, but no, I had played the part of the local expert, and Bill trusted me, and we paid the price.

Bill was steaming. This was the first time I had ever seen him angry.

"What are we supposed to do now?" he asked.

"Come on. No big deal. We can hitch a ride," I said.

Thinking that someone would certainly get us out to route 4 that we needed to get to Haifa, I led us eastward. Somehow, not a single car passed us. There were obviously more ways out of Caesarea than I had imagined, and I had led us to the one less travelled. We continued walking in an easterly direction and eventually I proudly pronounced:

"Here it is."

"Who's going to pick us up at 1:30 AM?" Bill asked.

I was thinking that he was overdoing it with his anger, but his pessimism was appropriate. A late partier returning from Tel Aviv picked us up about an hour later and dropped us off in the Hadar neighborhood, only an hour's walk from my apartment in Old Romema. Bill had had enough, and I was getting the silent treatment. That was understandable, since the situation was all on me. Bill, by all rights, should have been able to expect silence on that last leg of our odyssey. I, on the other hand, was seeing things differently. I had a captive audience. I knew where to start. I told him over and over again how lucky he was to have been born a Jew. Over the next kilometer I wondered out loud how it is that a thinking Jew such as Bill did not find himself pulled towards a new settlement in the Samaritan hills. The Jews have returned to their homeland after two thousand years! How can a Jew not want to be a part of this story?

At that time of night we were both punch-drunk of course. Bill didn't have the strength, or the desire, to engage with me and I, in my zealous righteousness, kept flapping my lips saying who knows what to my poor friend. As we drew closer to my apartment, and closer to dawn, I felt my head clear and I began to clarify what I had said during the long trek, summarizing Judaism and Zionism in a way that I thought would

be helpful to a wayward Jew. That was the last thing Bill wanted to hear. As I climbed up the path that led to my apartment, I was certain that what I had been saying must have been received in full. I had done my job. I had helped this Jew, my friend from Wabash College, Bill Berg, understand what was transpiring before our very eyes: a Jewish revolution that would ultimately transform the world.

Reaching the top of the climb I turned to address Bill directly. He was not behind me. I looked farther down the hill and there he was. He had not begun the climb and was standing below, staring at me from afar, and I realized that he had been staring at my back since I had begun to climb. He had not heard my executive summary. I couldn't believe it. He had missed my important conclusions. I raised my hands wide as if I were Moses holding a renewed decalogue as a free offering to my friend. It was just before dawn and my gesture was a silent one, but one I was sure he would understand after our private tutorial on the trail. Bill stared at me, then suddenly also raised his arms towards Heaven, and loudly shouted at me, answering everything that I had said since those players had exposed their inappropriate props:

"I don't want to be just a Jew!"

For just a moment, a thought flashed through my head: Ungrateful Israelite! But then I was engulfed, as if by the closing of the waters of the Sea of Reeds, with an overwhelming feeling of sorrow that I had forced my friend to take this stand. Why were we not laughing off the tribulations of the previous evening, as would have been natural for two friends at ease with one another? Then again, for a moment, while looking down at Bill, I felt even some anger for the son of a bitch for the totally understandable reason that he was right. Not about his declaration. No, that was a subjective conviction that concerned him, and concerned me only in as much as I saw his beliefs and actions as having an impact on the future of the Jewish people as a whole, which,

unfortunately, in my frame of mind on that morning and at that place, meant that it concerned me totally. Still, through my zeal, I could tell that he was right in an overall sense. From my initial failure to laugh at the ridiculous chorus of extruded rubber extensions right up to the moment of this my Jewish epiphany on Mount Carmel, there was another conversation that should have taken place.

That conversation would have centered about Bill. He was living the American dream—the Jewish American dream. His mother was to have a lawyer son. Even I, preoccupied as I was with myself, appreciated the fact that this was a notable achievement. He was the one that was moving ahead, doing the work that needed to be done, and doing it well. Even if I could not extract myself from the curse of egocentricity, there was still a conversation to put forward. Seeing that I planned to return to Wabash to finish my degree, I could have asked him about preparing for the comprehensive exams during senior year, or in general how he handled his final years at Wabash, leading to his graduating magna cum laude. I should have taken a moment to salute him. Bill, for his part, was not dwelling on that. He had a future; his life was on track.

It would have been easy enough to steer the conversation in a direction that would leverage the language that we still shared, that of literature. More than once in his modest way he mentioned that he believed that he had been accepted to law school on the strength of an essay he had written on Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. For the uninitiated, at the time that book was considered, in a way, as American Literature's answer to Joyce's *Ulysses*. I had not read it (and I have still not). I had started to read it the summer before I came to Israel but had found it unreadable. Not worth the candle, so to speak. It was simply too difficult to read. There was an irony in that. In my last semester at Wabash I had made something of a name for myself with that most notorious of difficult books, *Ulysses*. I had already re-read it, and I had become somewhat of a self-

proclaimed Joycean priest. In literature, I saw everything through the light of Ulysses. In a sense, I still do. I enjoyed the fact that it was a closed priesthood that not just anyone could join. Basic snobbery.

Here was Bill Berg mastering a no less difficult book. He was a Pynchon priest with striking ideas. More "hip" than I. I was insulted in the name of Joyceanism, and since there was not enough time to read *Gravity's Rainbow* during Bill's short stay with me, I kept our discussion away from literature, as if it held little importance for me. Nothing could have been farther from the truth, for since I had last seen Bill, I had studied literature very deeply.

My planned return to Wabash by then had been delayed one academic year, and then another. The huge irony in that was that during those two years I studied more literature than I ever imagined possible. I learned Shakespeare with a man who produced Shakespearean plays in London before immigrating to Israel. I learned creative writing with a poet who was an amateur weightlifter. One thought twice before disagreeing with him in class. I studied modern American literature with a young lecturer who could only see literature through a Freudian lens. That got old fast. I survived. More importantly, I was allowed to take graduate courses with the understanding that I would be credited for them once I finished my BA. Not only did I take these courses, but since several of the lecturers had to do their yearly army reserve duty, I was sometimes asked to "hold the fort" and conduct the seminars while they were gone, usually for three weeks. This turned out to be remarkably easy for me for two reasons. One, I loved the material that we were studying and two, my give-and-take with Emeka and, in absentia, Bill, proved to be the perfect preparation for the job.

It was a wild circus of learning, and I was talking and writing non-stop. But all of this was just the carnival outside of the Big Top. That was a proper three-ringed tent.

The first ring came in the form of a request from a doctoral candidate. The candidate handed me the Norton Anthology of English Literature and said: "summarize it for me and I'll pay you a thousand dollars." I immediately went into Arab souk bargaining mode and told the candidate that I would not open the book for less than two thousand dollars. We had an agreement, and I walked away thinking "not bad Ehud," considering the fact that I would have done it as a favor for free. The candidate hounded and badgered me relentlessly and once I realized the extent of the candidate's desperation it became clear to me that I could have asked for five thousand dollars and would have received it. Regardless, I pounded out those summaries on my typewriter and put my heart into the project. I did good work. The candidate passed whatever it was we had been preparing for. I felt that I had covered the material of two under-graduate survey courses, something that would stand me in good stead when I resumed my studies.

The second ring of the Big Top was a human encounter that was unexpected and underappreciated by me at the time. The program that I was initially enrolled in was called the "Overseas Study Program." There was a similar program at Tel Aviv University and at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem. If I had known this beforehand, I would have chosen the Hebrew University, but the pamphlet that my student advisor at Wabash, Bill Placher (of blessed memory), pulled out of a drawer in his desk was for Haifa University. I would love to know how that pamphlet got to Placher's drawer in the first place. As I would learn very quickly, these programs were designed for American Jewish college students, and as such, Wabash college would not be high on the list of wise marketing targets. For me, the program was a dream, and I am forever grateful to Placher for handing me the pamphlet and saying: "I think that this might interest you." The American Jewish students were for the most part coerced into participating. There was family pressure. The idea was to instill Jewish pride so that—I kid you not—there would be less a chance of

that college student marrying out of the faith. The result of this was widespread snoring in classes.

On the one hand, I could understand this. It must have been bad enough to have been forced to study in a foreign land—Jewish or not—but to have to sit in classes that carried no interest for the young Jewish student was asking too much. Their attention was not directed towards the classroom. As far as I could see, great efforts were made in reproducing as much as possible the American college experience in Israel, meaning partying, drinking, going out, and traveling. There were exceptions. I think maybe about ten percent were happy to be in the program. One or two became Israelis. But all, it seemed, were pecking hen-heads in class.

This I could not understand. There was a wonderful curriculum, including courses in every discipline imaginable. Israeli geography, sociology, history, archeology, Hebrew language at all levels from beginner to advanced, and my favorites, Hebrew Bible and (of course) modern Hebrew literature in translation. Later, much later, I was to learn that many of the lecturers were leaders in their fields, and I learned that after they had become household names. It seems like giving lectures in this program was a sinecure for favored lecturers. However, I discovered that these were well-prepared courses. The lecturers may have been in it for the money, but in my opinion, they earned it.

The course in Hebrew Bible would eventually be the catalyst for my conversion to Judaism. The second ring under the Big Top concerned the Modern Hebrew Literature course. Of all the courses that year, this one induced the most hours of sleep. The first class meeting of the first semester was at first an embarrassment for me. I set straight up in my chair in the front row, perky, hoping to become the teacher's pet. The rest of the students prepared for a nap. The lecturer was the author of a memoir of Kibbutz life. I sat poised to take copious notes, impatient to impress upon him that I too was a

serious student of literature and sometime, soon, hoped to be writing.

That whole façade came crashing down a few minutes after he began speaking. I was already yawning as I realized it was going to be a long semester. It soon became evident that the lecturer saw this course as a means to market his vanity press novel, that he had vanity-translated into English. Class after class, we would be introduced to another passage with the challenge of understanding its brilliance. I read it in one sitting after the first day of class. It was not brilliant. It was a coming-of-age novel in a Kibbutz setting. At best, it was a memoir posing as literature (ouch I say to myself as I write this). To my shame, I too spent the entire semester in that class slouched down in my chair, barely listening, daydreaming greatly.

The second semester also included a required course in Hebrew literature, and I entered the classroom expecting the worse. In walked the new lecturer who, as he made his way towards his desk and before looking at us asked:

“Why read literature?”

I sat up, still wary, but willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. Nobody answered. The rest of the class began their second semester hibernation and out of embarrassment, I answered listlessly:

“To learn about life.”

“Who said that?” he turned quickly towards us.

My so-called friends looked at me.

“You? Was it you? What do you mean by that?”

I gathered myself up in my chair and sized this person up. He was well-dressed, in stark contrast to the casual look of the students. His hair was flying up off the top of his head in

Albert Einstein style and I was thinking to myself ok he's going the mad professor route. Presumptuous of him. Over the next few minutes I saw that bushfire of hair as reflecting what was happening underneath it, a fiery, brilliant mind cross-examining me about ... well, just about everything. The rest of the class was blocked-out as we went at it. He was wrong, in so many of his thoughts and ideas, and I let him know it, loudly. At the bell, the class filed out and we remained.

I hadn't realized how thirsty I had been for such conversation. It was as if I were picking up my conversation with Bill Berg at Wabash, only with a different interlocutor. I had changed. I was no-longer the over enthusiastic puppy waving its tail for attention. I remember just being thankful that I had found an outlet for the ideas that had been steaming and scurrying back and forth in my brain like bacilli under a microscope. The words coming out of my mouth were my answer to the burning bush of his hair. There was relief, and I didn't hide it. We developed a private friendship over that semester and for the duration of that semester only, consisting of long hours of after-class discussions. This intelligent, friendly, and wholly interesting man was A.B. Yehoshua. I did not know it at the time, but he had published his first novel to wide acclaim a few months earlier, *The Lover*. He was a rising star in Hebrew letters, and I think that he enjoyed sitting with me and allowing me to bring him down to Earth.

I preached to him from my Joycean pulpit, and he seemed a willing disciple. I asked him what made Hebrew literature unique? As far as I could see it was a modern European literature written in Hebrew with events taking place in the Levant. Otherwise, having read by then at most three modern Israeli novels (in translation) and proclaiming myself an expert, what did the modern Israeli novel have to offer to the world of serious literature? Over our next few meetings he

answered me. What I received in essence was a private seminar on one story by Agnon that we had read in class. It was a master class, and over the course of that semester I learned about Jewish life before modern Israel, in particular Agnon's European perspective told to me by a Jew from Salonika, and how that Jewish world—both European and Arabic and everything in between—had returned to Israel.

That is the story of stories. The rebuilt nation of Israel. The return of the Jews to Zion. Yehoshua became noted for two things besides literature while at the peak of his fame and until his later years. The first was that he was fanatically against Jewish settlements in Judea and Samaria and Gaza. He believed, along with almost the entire Israeli intelligentsia, that the only thing preventing peace on Earth and good will towards men were right-wing messianic Jews (messianic in the sense of believing in the yet-to-appear Jewish Messiah) living beyond the "Green Line." It was once possible to hold this belief.

The Jews invented virtue signaling. When in conflict, there are always Jews who search out other Jews on which to pin the blame for the conflict, then turn to a watching world and proclaim: "I'm a good Jew. Those over there are bad Jews." It reached a point in recent Israeli history where the Israeli left would beseech Arafat and his minions to limit their attacks to settlers only. That would have made the left's demonization of the settlers much more to the point, helping to increase the pressure for eliminating a Jewish presence in Judea, Samaria and Gaza. Twenty years after my discussions with Yehoshua, and after I had read enough modern Hebrew literature in Hebrew and understood Yehoshua's important place in the Israeli literary canon, I thought to seek him out to see if he remembered our discussions, and to try to understand his extreme stance against Jewish settlements. The demonization prevented a resuming of the discussion. I hadn't the heart for it.

The mark of an estimable man is that he is not one-dimensional. A.B. Yehoshua was estimable. The second notable thing about A.B. Yehoshua beyond his hatred of Jewish settlers was his fierce universal Zionism. By that I mean that he thought that all Jews must be active Zionists and move to Israel, or they would cease to be Jews, sooner or later. Not only did he believe this, he travelled widely and presented this view to Jewish audiences the world over, receiving in answer howls of disagreement. Who is to say that he was not a prophet, with the well-ensconced Jews of the Diaspora now asking themselves in a whisper: "Is it going to get worse?"

The unheld conversation with Bill Berg might have scaled itself to the conversation that needs to take place today at the level of the Jewish people. That is the story that accompanies the story of stories. As strange as it may sound, with seemingly the entire world set against Israel and/or the Jewish people, amongst the Jews there are still basic issues of identity, unresolved since time eternal, that prevent the Jewish people from presenting a unified front against the onslaught of antisemitism, the most basic issue of all being determining what exactly a Jew is. For antisemites and Jews alike, this determination often devolves into the banal conviction that "we know one when we see one." Riding close on the tail (or tale) of that determination is the question: Who is a Jew? To expand the circle of uncertainty: What is a Zionist? Who is a Zionist? These are questions that can no longer be shoved aside. Every Jew on Earth is tumbling around in this washing machine of identity or is being tumbled around. A.B. Yehoshua emerged from his wash cycle with the declaration that there is no Jewish future outside of Israel. Many others emerge with their own interpretations. It is somewhat of a madhouse.

With all this happening in the collective hive-mind of the Jews, it may help to return and focus on Bill Berg's declaration that broke the train of my Zionist diatribe on

that early morning climb up the shortcut to my apartment on Palmach Street. There was a flip side to what he said. If he were saying that he did not want to be “just a Jew”, he was at the same time asking me if I were intending to be “just a Jew.” That is what struck me and electrified me. He was asking me if I were intending to throw away all that we held in common. Literature. Art. Beauty. My reaction to Lysistrata, or the fiasco of the flapping phalluses, must have seemed to him a rejection of all that. Though there was no way at that time to finesse the dialogue, looking back now I have understanding and love for both Bill and myself. Bill, and through projection the Jews of the Diaspora, could not and cannot accept the either/or dichotomy demanded by Elijah on Mt. Carmel where we stood:

Elijah approached all the people and said, “How long will you keep hopping between two opinions? If the ETERNAL is God, then follow [the ETERNAL]; and if Baal, follow [Baal]!” But the people answered him not a word. ([I Kings.18:21](#))

This is what happens on Mount Carmel. Demand clarity. Be a mensch. Take a stand. Bill’s declaration demonstrated that he had clarity, and that I did not. Bill left Israel and left me wretched. Bill’s declaration became for me a personal Elijah, pounding in my head. There was a constant internal tension. The more I grew closer to Judaism, the deeper grew my connection to literature. I remained on the fence, clutching both worlds for as long as I could. I did not want to lose what might be gained from each endeavor. I wanted to go to war and have my wife waiting for me when I returned, Lysistrata be damned!

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Ehud Neor was born in South Carolina and raised on Martha’s

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