

Becoming a Sunday School Teacher

In March 1956, when I returned from the Army, returned to NYU, and returned to the ILGWU, my life returned to being much as it was before: frenetic. However, by the fall of 1956, several changes took place. I was no longer going to school, I had a new job, and life was calmer. I thought I was finished with school...until I received a letter from the NY State Board of Regents telling me that as a veteran, I was entitled to a state scholarship. Why not. But what should I study? Working at the Jewish Labor Committee, I decided to study something Jewish. I looked into Hebrew Union College and found a class in Jewish History. So in the spring of 1957, I enrolled.

While attending class, I saw several notices placed by Reform Temples for Sunday school teachers for the 1957-58 school year. Not a bad way to make extra money. One notice was from the East End Temple at 17th Street and Second Avenue. I called them, made an appointment and went down for an interview. I felt it was very “khutzpedik” (nervy) of me to apply. What do I know about teaching Sunday school? But since I did not have a high opinion of Reform Sunday schools, I felt that having attended an Orthodox Hebrew school for five years, having a Master’s degree in Education, and taking a class in Jewish history, I qualified. And if I didn’t, let them tell me.

We had a very pleasant interview. I met the Rabbi and the Sunday school principal, and they seemed impressed (which confirmed my low opinion of Reform Sunday schools.) They may not have had many applicants, because they offered me the position. Before the term started, I met the other faculty, and I was given my assignment, the curriculum, and the textbooks. I think I had the second and third grades, youngsters between the ages of seven and nine. This should be easy. Just keep ahead of the kids.

That is what I did. It meant getting up Sunday morning, (no more sleeping late) having prepared the lessons the night before. But it paid well, and I really liked the kids. I also was impressed with the commitment on the part of the parents and Temple members. For years, I had thought of Reform Jews as diluting traditional worship and trying to imitate goyim. They prayed without yarmulkes or Tallisim—and in English—and some Temples even had organs! As teenagers in the Bronx, we told the joke about Reform Jews bragging about whose Temple is more Reform: “My Temple has a snack bar on Yom Kippur.” “My Temple serves a catered lunch.” “On Yom Kippur, my Temple puts out a sign: Closed for the Holidays.” It turns out that the people I met at the East End Temple, and the representatives of the UAHC that I worked with at NCRAC, were among the most committed to Judaism and Social Justice that I had met.

As most teachers acknowledge, I learned a lot—from the kids themselves. They were bright, and most of them actually wanted to learn. We had fun, and stimulating discussions as we worked our way through the curriculum. I also learned a bit more about the Jewish holidays, and my Jewish history class was very useful. My only previous teaching was as a student teacher in high school in 1949, which was great, and a few weeks as a substitute teacher in the Bronx and in Harlem in 1950. Sadly, the emphasis then was on discipline. I thought back to my own Hebrew school experience in a basement classroom in my Orthodox Synagogue. A very different experience, both with regard to.; the atmosphere and the material.

Before I knew it, the year was over. It turned out to be a great year, but I didn't go back for a second year. We had a second child and I was taking on more responsibility at work. One thing that I took away were copies of their Reform Haggadah. I replaced our old Maxwell House Haggadahs with theirs, which was much more kid-friendly, lots of English, and among the songs was Go Down Moses. Thanks to my teaching in a Reform Sunday school, our Seders became much more fun.

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