

RAMBLINGS OF A TEXAN RABBI

by Jimmy Kessler



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E-mail: jimmykessler@gmail.com

Web: <http://www.jimmykessler.com>

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*Dedicated To
Shelley,
My Better Half*

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*Ramblings of a
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Birth

Just for the record I was born on December 10, 1945 at St. Joseph's Hospital in Houston. I'm told that in those days almost all the nurses were Roman Catholic Nuns. It is interesting that so many Jewish kids were born in that hospital that they had a "bris room". Actually it was a large meeting room where not only could the circumcision take place, but so could the reception afterward.

I attended Sutton Elementary, Roberts Elementary, Pershing Jr. High and San Jacinto Senior High, graduating in January, 1964. I attended the University of Texas and graduated with a major in Zoology and minor in Chemistry and Psychology. I then attended the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati and Jerusalem, 1967-1972.

High School

YOU JUST NEVER KNOW

Over the past 29 years of serving Congregation B'nai Israel in Galveston I've been privileged to speak in various churches in the area. Once in a while I'd see someone I had encountered before or on the Island.

Then there was the Sunday I was asked to speak at a Methodist church in Dickinson. I shall not mention the name on purpose but I was the guest speaker in place of the sermon.

I sat through the service and then the pastor introduced me. My topic was Judaism and the Bible. The real topic, however, of most of these visits is usually "ask anything and everything you ever wanted to know about Judaism or the Old Testament since we have a Rabbi captive."

Candidly, I love it. It's a wonderful way to teach and more over to correct misconceptions. That given Sunday was no exception. There were about 100 or so folk present and there was no shortage of questions.

To establish my legitimacy, I usually note that I am a native Houstonian, I went to San Jacinto Senior High and I graduated from the University of Texas when it was "THE" University of Texas and had no "at" in the title.

As I was proceeding into my standard spiel about my Rabbinic

training, a lady in the back of the room raised her hand with a question. I couldn't see her well, but I readily called on her. In a loud, clear voice, she asked, "So why did you go to San Jac?"

It immediately struck me that I was in trouble because no one would use that phrase "San Jac" unless they had been there as well; and, I never remember names or faces as my wife can attest to.

Before I could get out much of an answer, she continued by asking, "and why didn't you ever go out for drama if you were going to become a Rabbi?"

Thankfully before I could get both feet in my mouth to bite down, she walked down front and with a broad smile said, "Hi, I'm Bennie Nipper, your 10th grade English teacher."

I was dumbstruck. After a big hug, I stood back and declared, "you don't look any older than you did in your class room." I then continued to sing her praises to those who were present.

Mrs. Nipper was a wonderful teacher. She used to remind us that Gale Storm had gone to San Jac and hanging in that classroom was the plaque given to the school by the "This Is Your Life" television show for the outstanding drama student each year. More over she went on to mention the names of a dozen or so folk with whom I had gone to school.

I remember that she always attracted the "most different" kids in the school. They were the folk who wanted to be in theatre and dressed for it on a daily basis. My great daring was that I

played the oboe in the band with Mr. Elkins.

Bennie Nipper explained that she stayed in the area and founded and was the director of the Bay Area Harbour Playhouse in Dickinson. Thankfully she is still going strong in her 80's.

It's one of those funny things in life that we at various times encounter folk with whom we have walked in the past. Clearly this was a wonderful blessing for me.

Fortunately, she had some nice things to say about me.

SO WHERE WERE YOU?

I'm sure that everyone already knows that this question refers to where you were when President John Kennedy was murdered.

I was in my last semester at San Jac. Those were the days of mid-term graduates for us who were born after September. I was headed to the University of Texas which was/is located in Austin in January. However, before then I was still in high school.

The day before the President was shot, I was in a mass band on the field of Rice Stadium playing Hail To The Chief as he was driven around the field in an open convertible. Given the location our band director, Bill Elkins, obtained for us, the Golden Bear Band members could reach out and touch the

President if we had the nerve.

On the next day, Friday, November 22, 1963, I was sitting in Mrs. Margaret Moore's Civics' class. A notice came over the PA system of the shooting and Mrs. Moore rushed out of the classroom. In a while she returned with very red eyes, a handkerchief over her face. I later learned that she had been a part of his welcoming committee the day before when he was in Houston. She was very active in the Texas Democratic party.

I remember that she didn't say much. Now and then one of us would talk to each other. I really don't remember if we got out early and I don't remember much more about the time in the class. However, I do remember how upset Mrs. Moore was, as she was one of my favorite teachers.

It's funny how we remember significant events. A goodly number of those in my life took place in my three years at San Jac. If you permit, I'll share some more.

J. P. Finfrock Lore

Though I sat in J.P.Finfrock's chemistry class in 1962, I am sure that many other Golden Bears from decades back will remember him well. A very thin, skeletal looking gentleman, his gentle approach to the vast world of chemistry was incredibly seductive. In college, I minored in that field at UT because of him.

Interestingly Mr. Finfrock went to college before atomic energy

was described. As a result, he never taught that unit to us about nuclear energy. Instead his inorganic lectures and most especially his organic chemistry presentations were memorable. More over while many of my college classmates struggled through organic, I found it easily manageable thanks to Mr. F.

Mr. Finrock was obviously one of those devoted to teaching. He graduated from Rice in the days when it was Rice Institute and was tuition free. Though he didn't complete his master's degree, his thesis was a collection of high school classroom experiments on how to teach inorganic and organic chemistry.

After a brief conversation, Mr. Finrock allowed me and Jack Izakson to sign up for a two-person study hall with him. During that hour we set up demonstrations and experiments for future classes. In addition, he gave us more advanced experiments to try.

I tried one. I tried it during a parent's night when he asked Jack and me to come in and run some experiments for visitors to the lab. Unfortunately, I forgot to turn on the exhaust fan that was to pull out the blue vapors the chemicals produced. As a result, not only was there cloud of blue smoke in the room, but it stained the inside of the vent hood a deep blue. Thankfully Mr. F never said too much about it.

My class was one of those mid-terms graduating groups. As our gift to the school, we established the J. P. Finrock Award for the graduating senior who demonstrated a particular interest in science. The last time I visited the campus, I was pleased to see

the plaque on display with the names of the students so honored.

Over the years, I have encountered numerous San Jac grads that had similar memories about Mr. Finfrock. Certainly, he was one of the many outstanding teachers that kept San Jacinto in the forefront of Texas high schools.

WHAT DOES YOUR FATHER DO?

I'm sure you know about the National Honor Society and it's importance in high school. Well, some of us who weren't sure we'd ever qualify for NHS membership discovered that there was also a National Spanish Honor Society. It was called Circulo Amistad and if you were a member, it was recorded on your transcript.

So, we persuaded our Spanish teacher, Ms. Esther Trevino, to become the sponsor and San Jacinto High School had a new honor society. As one of our programs, we organized a tour of the Houston port on their tour ship, the Houston. The uniqueness of our tour was that it was to be entirely in Spanish.

To be honest, my classmates who spoke Spanish fluently and at home, had no problem with the language. The rest of us weren't quite so good. So, in reality most of the tour was in English.

Now I tell you all this just to tell you about the ride home after the tour. I owned a two door Ford Falcon and I had agreed to

pick up Ms. Trevino at her apartment and take her home after the tour.

A member of our class and a friend was Barbara Levy and she arranged for me to drop her off at her father's office after the tour. The scene is now set for you.

The three of us got in my car, we left the port and headed toward San Jac. Two blocks or so south, I pulled up to Barbara's dad's office. As I opened my door to let her out from the back seat, Ms. Trevino was beside herself. She insisted that I could not let Barbara off at this building. She told me it was unseemly and dangerous and under no condition was she going to allow her student to enter that building.

By the way, you all, Ed Levy was the owner and director of Levy's Funeral Home.

Ms. Trevino was such a proper lady that until I agreed to not only walk Barbara to the door but insisted that her dad come out and wave it was OK, she was not going to allow me to drive off. Obviously, all this took place in English.

I don't remember that Circulo Amistad did much more, but I do know it helped on my transcript. Just another bit of San Jac lore.

How Times Change

I wonder at times about how experiences at San Jac added much to our lives but which are now absent from our children's

experiences.

In 1962 San Jacinto High was not in its hay-day. Our football team was in the process of having the longest losing record of any American high school. Perhaps one of our lone glories was Conley Brown in track.

Yet we were still Golden Bears and in spite of our small size, we in the band made a mighty sound, even me on the oboe. Perhaps the annual Christmas programs were a wonderful example. Yep, in those days they were “Christmas” programs.

We had a wonderful choir taught by Mr. McCaffety and that actually went on concert tours in the state. They performed sacred season music that was outstanding. AND, that choir contained a goodly number of Jewish students.

I mention that fact because it didn’t seem to hurt anyone of any faith to learn the words and to sing the music of another faith. For that matter, it didn’t hurt us Jewish kids in the band to accompany them. To this day, I find myself quite able to join in singing most Christmas songs at community events.

Clearly there needs to separation of church and state, and no one ought to be forced to participate in some event contrary to their beliefs. On the other hand, I sometimes wonder if we have lost some appreciation of our friends’ traditions by neutralizing everything.

By the way, as far as I know now, that choir and that band produced at least one minister, but also two rabbis.

Do You Think His Cousin Will Come to Class?

There were several folk at San Jac in my days that were but a few steps from someone of note.

If you'll remember, the NBC western television series *Bonanza* was very popular and certainly one of its most adored stars was Dan Blocker.

Blocker played Hoss Cartwright and in 1966 he was the star of the Houston Rodeo. It turns out that Blocker was from De Kalb, Texas, taught school in the State prior to ultimately moving to California where his career blossomed.

Several years before his performance in Houston, Blocker's name came a step closer to me in a high school English class taught by Mrs. Mamie Clayton. I vaguely remember that one of the major units in the class was writing stories. Perhaps my penchant for writing stories today was touched in that second-floor classroom overlooking the flagpole.

One day Mrs. Clayton asked us to share our ideas about the current story assignment. As she went around the room calmly inquiring, one of my classmates reported that he was going to write on his cousin, the actor.

Bix Blocker, as best I remember him though I did not find his name in the *El Orosio* I own, proceeded to explain that he had one cousin who was the president of UTMB in Galveston (Dr. Truman Blocker) and another cousin who was Dan Blocker the actor and about whom he was going to write a paper.

Obviously, there was a lot of excitement in hearing that we had a schoolmate with a famous relative. Speculation immediately began on whether Bix could get Dan to come and visit our class.

I recall the event in school not because of the zeal of my classmates, including me, but of our teacher. For a couple of days afterward, Mrs. Clayton asked Bix about his cousin's presence at San Jac.

And then, she turned to me. For some reason and for months afterward, she thought I was the one who would know about the possibilities of Dan Blocker in our classroom; not Bix.

Now I'm not related to any of these folk; I was not a Rabbi at the time; and, "I am not a prophet nor the son of a prophet." Maybe it was because my momma always told me to be nice to older folk and clearly Mrs. Clayton was in that group.

At any rate, Dan Blocker didn't come to San Jac when I was there nor did Dr. Blocker from Galveston. However it certainly brought some excitement to warm spring class in English. Even in my day, San Jacinto was an interesting place to attend.

The Teachers' Play Toys

My years at San Jac included the construction and utilization of the two buildings in front of the original structure. Those buildings housed the vocational education facilities that were used not only for the high school students during the day but by the general community at night.

One of those classrooms held the new chemistry rooms occupied by Mr. Finfrock.

Another of those classrooms housed Mr. Skinner and his many “play toys.”

I ended up in his class because I wanted to take “academic physics.” No one else wanted to take it that semester. So I was put in a “vocational physics” class and given “academic” credit for the course.

Learning to wire a car and an icebox may have been very helpful to the other folk in the class, but not real helpful when I got to UT and they presumed I knew something about levers and fulcrums.

Candidly, without the help of my Kindergarten classmate David Schwarz, I would have never passed the course let alone made a “B.” We met in elementary school, went through San Jac together and are still friends today.

The lab room looked like something out of the original Frankenstein movie though more modern. There were numerous dials and connection points and wires and gauges and capacitors and (sounds like I know something, right) who knows what else.

Each class session, when we entered the lab, there was some sort of gizmo set up doing some sort of odd thing. It sparked, it went round and round, it made noises, and it at times it looked dangerous.

Periodically we were dared to touch the contraption to see what it felt like. No one was ever hurt, but given my ignorance of the equipment, I never ventured forward.

Now I remember all of this because once when I was in college in Austin and I was having car trouble, I correctly identified a starter connection at an auto mechanic's shop. He was impressed, and I was shocked!

I guess I learned more than I thought. Thanks David!

The Voice of the Golden Bear Marching Band

So, there I was a new student at San Jac having finished three years at Pershing Jr. High. When I entered Pershing, I convinced my parents to let me join the band. As the short, fat kid, band saved me from gym.

The problem was, what instrument do I want to learn to play. I have no idea why I decided so, but I selected the clarinet. My folks rented a horn from Brochstein Music and I began to learn to play the instrument.

After about six months, I met an older kid in Hebrew school named Doug Loeb. He walked into my Hebrew class with the interesting looking case that was thinner than my clarinet case. When I asked what it was, he opened it and I saw my first oboe in person. I was fascinated.

It was fortuitous that Pershing Jr. High had two oboes that

students could borrow. Douglas Loeb had one and Mr. Vilani, the band director, loaned me the other one, and my oboe playing days began.

Though the Pershing band did not march, the San Jac band did. And ... that's when I learned that oboes don't march. I was told that the school was afraid that if an oboe student fell, the metal tube that holds the reed could travel up through the roof of the player's mouth and kill them.

That's how I became the "voice" of the Golden Bear Marching Band. At each football game when our band marched, I was up in the press box announcing, "ladies and gentlemen, let me direct you to the south end of the field where San Jacinto Senior High School is proud to present the 1962 Golden Bear Marching Band under the direction of Mr. William Elkins." In addition, I became the student conductor and was privileged to conduct the band now and then at games.

However, along with the fun came the fact that now and then I was given the oversized bass drum to carry and sometimes played when we marched in a parade. Let me assure you I couldn't keep up a constant beat, but I was one of the larger folk in the band and so Bill Elkins thought I'd be a good person to carry the drum.

Now I mention all of this because my first job after ordination was as the campus Rabbi (Hillel Director) at UT Austin. I looked forward to the added benefit of doing the invocation at Southwest Conference football games. After all, I knew how to announce. Unfortunately, that was the year that they did away

with blessings at SWC games. So none of the UT fans ever got the privilege of my well-seasoned “football” voice. Only SJHS benefited.

The Fattening Driver’s Ed Class

In the late 1950’s and early 1960’s one could get a hardship driver’s license in Texas at the age of 14. I got one. My grandfather had experienced a mild stroke and his doctor certified that I needed a license, so I could ride with him and drive if necessary.

Now my father had made me a promise that he would get me a car when I could get a driver’s license. I don’t think he knew anything about the hardship license. Yet he adapted very well and what I hoped might have been a Chevy convertible, turned out to be an 80 HP, two door Ford Falcon with no AC. I remember it cost \$1800 that included tax, title and license.

I was supposed to take the Drivers’ Ed course to get the insurance discount. By the time there was a space in Drivers’ Ed, I had been driving for a good while. Unfortunately, that could not be said for the other two guys in my class. Today I don’t remember their names nor am I sure of the teacher (it might have been Mr. Gregory) but I remember the class.

We met at the car on the east side of the building for a first period class. I remember the teacher asked if any of us had driven before and I said yes; so, I was the first behind the wheel.

It was fine leaving the school and ultimately heading south on Alameda. We continued south for a number of blocks until we crossed Binz and came upon a donut shop. As the teacher instructed, I parked the car on the side of the strip center and we all went in for what turned out to be warm donuts and cold Cokes.

The adventure began when we left, and the next student got behind the wheel. The other two students had not driven very much, if at all. The next half hour or so was spent with the rotation of two drivers each struggling to not have a wreck. It was then that the rest of us learned there was another brake pedal in the car – on the far right side, for the teacher to slam on.

At some point the teacher had me get back behind the wheel and drive us back to San Jac. The routine became established: Kessler drove out to the donut shop each class, the other two students drove a bit on neighborhood streets and Kessler drove back on the busy streets.

I stayed with the class till I had fulfilled the insurance requirements that also changed my license to a regular one. Once I had the license, I moved to a study hall and I lost track of that driving group, though I presume they all passed the State exam.

Unfortunately for me, as someone who is always trying to lose weight, I might have gained an insurance discount for the family, but I also gained a few pounds in that Drivers' Ed class.

Four Candles and Freshman English

Freshman English at the University of Texas was considered a “flunkout” course. That meant that it was one of the most difficult courses one had to get through to stay in the University.

There were, of course, ways to get around those two semesters of terror. You could take them in summer school at another school though one never knew if the summer course would be worse.

And there was the Writing Sample. You weren’t required to do this part of the SAT organization’s exams, but you could submit it to college. If you wrote well enough on the writing assignment, you could place out of one and MAYBE both semesters of Freshman English.

In my case, I figured I had nothing to lose. The Sample consisted of being given a theme and a period of time to write on that theme. I didn’t know at the time, at least I don’t think I knew, but you wrote on two pads of paper where each pad had about 6 sheets in each divided by carbon paper. So you were to press down hard so 6 copies were made and the two pads meant you had two pages on which to write your essay sample. Supposedly they were sent to 6 readers who submitted comments that resulted in your score.

So, I registered for the Writing Sample.

During that Spring before my last semester, I was elected to the

National Honor Society. Candidly I didn't know how as I never applied. However, I think the teachers decided who got in. It was a big deal to my parents and they came for the installation. I don't remember too much of the event that was held in the auditorium, but I remember the candles.

During the ceremony, four candles were lit standing for the four components for which the Society stood. They were scholarship, leadership, service and character. After they were lit, each of us received a certificate and a pin

That Spring I sat for the SAT and the Writing Sample. Candidly I don't remember the theme, but I remember the test. I never did well on standardized tests and the SAT was a prime example. The testing site I chose was Rice University as I lived in that neighborhood.

After a strained morning of darkening little circles, I arrived for the Sample after lunch time. I had no idea of how I would do, but I was ready to give it a try. Again, I don't remember the exact theme, but I vaguely think it had to do with about@ one's character.

Out of nowhere, those four words from the National Honor Society ceremony came to mind. I wrote them in the margin so I wouldn't forget them and I proceeded to write an essay using them as the theme. I tried not to make mistakes, I tried to press hard, I even remember sort of marking the pages, so I be sure to have enough room to get all four themes in and finally I remember constantly looking at my watch as it was a timed exam.

I turned in the essay with time to spare and headed home. Time passed and the SAT scores came out. Mine were OK, but not good enough to get into Rice even though I was the class valedictorian. However, I heard nothing about the Writing Sample.

Being a mid-term graduate, the Fall semester was both upbeat as it was the last, but frightening because it was the last. Thankfully I was admitted to UT and just presumed I would be taking the normal freshman courses including English.

Some time at the end of October, I got a note to appear at the Principal's office. I arrived and was handed an envelope from his secretary. It was addressed to me, but sent to San Jac; and, it was from the University of Texas.

Oh yes, in my day it was THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS; not "at" anything.

I remember going into one of the stair towers and noticing that the letter was post marked in early September. I also noticed the letter had been opened and was just taped together.

To my utter amazement, the letter informed me that I had not only placed out of the first semester of freshman English, but the second semester as well. Though I was angry at San Jac for making me wait almost two months to learn the results, I was beside myself with joy. One less worry about failing out of college.

To this day, when I think of the NHS, I don't think of it's import,

I think of how it got me out of Freshman English. During the 14 years I taught as an adjunct professor at Galveston College, I told that story frequently as an example of how thinking out of the box can help you achieve a great deal.

The Biggest Guy for the Biggest Job

So, there I was minding my own business in Miss. Trevino's homeroom class. I was one of those mid-term graduates who was going to finish high school one week and start college the following week.

College for me was the University of Texas. In those days you didn't have to add "at Austin"; there was only ONE UT. My father was planning on driving me up to Austin as there was a freshman car ban in those days.

Anyhow, Miss Trevino was making suggestions to members of the homeroom for improving their high school records. Out of no where she turns to me and says, "Mr. Kessler I think you should run for class president."

I don't know who was more startled; me or my classmates. She began to go on and on about how it would look on my transcript if I was president of the senior class – midterm of course.

Fortunately, the bell rang and I forgot the suggestion as the day went by. When I got home, I just mentioned it to my parents who thought it was a great idea. They spent the entire evening

telling me how I might conduct a campaign.

On the way to school the next morning I had hoped the idea had gone by the wayside. Unfortunately, I found on my homeroom desk an application form required when filling to run for a class officer. All of it was completed, except my signature. I was stuck.

Did I run, and did I win? Let me take you to the school auditorium where the entire senior class (both Winter and Spring) assembled to hear the candidates give their campaign speeches.

I had only one opponent. I won't tell you his name. Let me note, however, that he probably weighed less than one-half of me. He spoke first and when it came my turn, I remember standing up and saying, "I know the job of senior class president is a big job and there is no question in my mind but that I'm the biggest guy running." I sat down.

Miss. Trevino and my parents were ecstatic as I gave the president's comments for the class at graduation. I won't tell you it's the last office in a group I have run for, but it was clearly the best campaign address I ever gave.

The Sliderule

During my days at San Jac, I planned on becoming a physician. I entered the University of Texas with that plan in mind and so I majored in Zoology and minored in Chemistry and Psychology.

The science courses in high school were then important in setting down a foundation of information for college. Candidly I don't remember in which class the idea of using a slide rule arose, but it clearly came to the fore. Long before personal computers.

That night at home when I mentioned the need, my father, who was a dentist, got this knowing smile on his face and told me we were going shopping Saturday afternoon when he came home from the office.

A couple of days later we were in downtown Houston at an engineering supply store. Instead of the thin slide rule I had seen in class, the clerk pulled out a Post Versalog in a leather case. Out of that cover came this beautiful piece of wood with more rows of numbers than I could imagine.

We left that store with the Versalog that was now mine. Though the case had a strap for carrying the slide rule on your belt, I was afraid to do so. You see, I was already the short, overweight, spectacled geek; I didn't need to add to it with a slide rule.

I proudly took it to school the next day, but carefully carried it in my hand. I did that for a few days until ... until I saw one of the most popular kids in school swinging the same slide rule from his belt.

Yep, there in the hall was Skipper (Dr. Merrit) Bonner, president of the class before mine, carrying the same Versalog that I had in my hand. Somehow that gave me permission to attach my

slide rule to my belt and made me feel much better about using it in class.

Obviously, I knew I was still a geek, but not quiet as bad.

Incidentally, no one ever commented on my slide rule other than to ask me if I got the same answer they did; or, could I give them the answer.

By the way, I still have the Versalog.

How I Got to San Jac

I spent the first 12 years of my life at St. Joseph's Hospital and on Rosedale Street. And then my parents moved west because everyone they knew were moving.

Apparently, my folks were not too concerned about schools in their move as we settled on MacArthur that was two blocks outside the Bellaire high school district. Even in the 1950's Bellaire was the desirable high school.

In those days, folk who lived where we did had two choices: Lamar or San Jacinto. My parents weren't happy and tried to get me a transfer but they were told "no" by the principal, Mr. Andrews, because "Bellaire had too many Jews already".

So I went off to Lamar for my first day. What a shock! There were more Corvettes in their parking lot than I think were in the various Chevrolet dealers' lots in town. It only got "worse"

for me.

On the second day I found that there were posters on the walls for the football season. One of them was titled “Beat Bel-Aviv” and the Bellaire football players were occupied picking up pennies from the ground that the Lamar team had dropped and paid no attention to the ball carrier making a Lamar touchdown.

Now I’m sure the school was great for other kids, including Jewish students. However it was not the place for me. So there was no third day at Lamar; instead, that was my first day at San Jac.

My dad was happy because he worked on the north side of town and took San Jacinto St. through downtown and could drop me off; and, catching a city bus home on Main Street was easy.

My first day at San Jac was much more welcoming. Candidly I don’t remember anything very special about it except that when I got home I told my parents that I was happy there.

50+ years later I find myself basking in the light of being a San Jac grad. I have the opportunity to speak now and then on Texas History and San Jac never fails to be a part of my presentation. It will surely continue to be so.

Humor at San Jac

On page 101 of the 1963 El Orosio are the photos and comments

devoted to the publication of the yearbook. There in one photo sit the two funniest students at San Jac in my day – Joan Krafcheck and Richard Benton.

Richard and I were in the San Jac band. He played the clarinet and I, the oboe. Joan and I knew each other from Sunday School and youth groups as well as school. In each of those areas alone, they were outstanding in their wit and humor.

How much the more so when you consider that together they had San Jacinto Senior High School for a stage and the student body, staff, and faculty as an audience. I commend to you again the 1963 El Orosó where beginning on page 204 you will find their handiwork labeling several pages of diverse photos of folk at the school.

High school could be monotonous, tedious, boring and scary. It was, for me. None the less the personalities of the folk around me that brought to life and light wonderful memories. Joan and Richard were clearly at the top of that list. One never knew how they were going to respond to a given situation and that, in hindsight, was a blessing.

San Jac was unlike the other high schools in Houston in many ways, some of which I have mentioned on these pages in the past. Joan and Richard were instrumental in helping to shape that uniqueness. For those who were there in the 60's, perhaps these few words will bring back delightful memories.

I suspect the best proof I can give you for my memories appears on page 221 where these two delightful characters are declared

to be the “Wittiest” in the Class.” I’ve lost track of Richard, but I visit with Joan regularly. Thankfully, she hasn’t changed. We’re still very blessed.

Lunch in the Parking Lot

So by the time I got to San Jac, Princes drive in was gone and there weren’t any appealing places near campus. So, my friend Dave Schwarz and I decided we could bring lunch each day, sit in his car in the parking lot and watch the goings on.

Now David and I each had a car, but his had AC and mine did not. Obviously, we chose to sit in his car with the radio and AC on. It wasn’t a hard choice.

Our lunches seem to be the same: bologna sandwiches, chips, cookies and a frozen soft drink that was pretty much thawed by the time of our lunch period. No one ever seemed to pay attention to us going out of the building and no one asked for a hall pass. Maybe they knew and trusted us, but more likely no one cared.

Usually these in-car lunches were uneventful. David was an auto-mechanics major and I was a science/math geek who wanted to be a physician. He had much more interesting gossip than I did. However, since we were both in the same youth group, we had a lot in common to consider for weekends.

However, none of those topics were the center of our attention. Rather, it was the goings on in the parking lot that kept our

attention. During one sequence of days we watched several guys comparing battle wounds from what we presumed to be weekend skirmishes. Knife wounds were compared for length and the number of sutures. A couple of gunshot injuries were matched for size and damage. Candidly, they were the first we had ever seen.

Then there were drug deals that seemed to be happening in any and every place on the lot. Since “grass” was not quite so prevalent, we presumed it was heroin or the like. Truly neither of us was into drugs; our great no-nos were beer, liquor and cigars.

Nonetheless, the parking lot was a wonderful place to experience life in Houston. I’m sure this went on in other locations and other high schools, but this was OUR parking lot and OUR fellow students and a great place to be.

Dave and I spent most of our lunches in 11th and 12th grade eating in the car, though we did frequent the cafeteria periodically. Clearly the San Jac parking lot was much more interesting. Thankfully, if I knew anyone involved in any of the activities, I don’t remember any name now – it was too long ago. What I do remember is that though the food might have been better off campus, the sights and scenes would certainly have not been.

For us, the parking lot was truly a San Jac legacy worth cherishing.

War of Northern Aggression

So, when I was in eighth grade at Pershing Junior High I studied the American Civil War. My father liked history and so it was fun to see who could remember battles, Congressional actions, Presidential decrees and just Civil War trivia.

When I moved to San Jac, I found myself once again taking American History with a certain emphasis on the Civil War. As the days went by, I thought I noticed a difference in the presentation.

My teacher was Mrs. Kennon and at least she knew Nikita Khrushchev's name. My eighth-grade teacher called him Kirshkoff.

The issue was that we were studying the Southern generals and battles but paying little attention to the Northern aspect of the war. Now I knew Texas was a part of the Confederacy, but I learned that Texas did not consider itself as such a hardnosed Southern state.

Before the end of the first week, things became very clear when she corrected one of my classmates by saying that we were not studying the American Civil War but rather the War of Northern Aggression!

At first I thought she was joking until several weeks later there was a question on a quiz asking for the true name of the war fought in the 1860's. I can assure you that "Civil War" was not the correct answer.

Candidly my father thought I was joking when I came home and reported the slanted view. Though I don't think he was very happy about it, he certainly encouraged me to follow what was required in class.

A number of years later in an American History undergrad course at the University of Texas, I tried that label on Professor Joe Franz, the chair of the department. He laughed and said that it might not have been that far off the mark and wondered about the teacher who presented the idea. It was interesting to realize that San Jac wasn't so far behind.

Horse Poop and All

I started playing in the band in junior high school. In as much I was always the short, "husky" kid; athletics was never my thing. Not having many choices, I opted for band and though I started out on the clarinet, I became an "oboist."

Now playing the oboe was neat. Most friends had heard of one but never saw one. Unfortunately, that's where it ended. It wasn't a guitar and it wasn't a piano and it wasn't the drums. After one rendition of the Egyptian snake dance, I was finished.

So, it struck me that I could also play the drums. I even went to Evans Music Shop in the Village and got a beginning book on snare drums.

Unfortunately, the high school band director did not see it that way. Since I was a "big guy", if I was going to play a drum, it

had to be the bass drum. Yep, the big bass drum. A big drum for a big guy.

Most of the folk in the percussion section were tall and thin. It seemed that the bass drum might have weighed more than they did. This was before the thin bass drums or the light ones. Ours was a big wooden framed instrument.

My first opportunity to play the drums was not in the auditorium, not in the band room, not even at a football game. No...my first opportunity was to carry the bass drum in a Foley's sponsored parade.

Candidly, I don't remember if it was for Christmas or the Fat Stock Show. Regardless of the excuse for the parade, it was a rainy day and there were horses in the parade.

The Golden Bear Marching Band in my day was not very large. I guess we marched 30 folk. Now if I only played the oboe, I would have never marched. I was told it was against the school district rules as they were afraid if one fell with a oboe reed in the mouth, the metal tube could be pushed up through the roof of your mouth and kill you.

However, since I volunteered to learn to play the bass drum and "carry it" (which I didn't remember was part of the deal), I got to march. So, in uniforms I thought were designed for the north east (very heavy) and a bass drum strapped over my shoulders, I marched in the parade.

Perhaps I should tell you that I normally sweat a lot. If you add

a heavy uniform and a bass drum, I can assure you I was dripping throughout the route. I know we marched up Main Street in front of Foley's, but I don't recall the rest of the route. I clearly remember that several times in each block, I stepped in a large pile of horse poop provided by the animals in front of us. It was our privilege, however, to be FOLLOWED by those guys cleaning up the street and the poop.

We did ultimately arrive at the end of the Parade. I do remember that my light brown shoes that were to match my band uniform were now covered with horse poop. I was soaked through and so was the uniform.

I was told that I did keep up the beat and some told me that my playing kept them in step. I hope I said thank you, but I certainly wasn't in a mood to take any pride in what I had done.

Before I left, I told Mr. Bill Elkins, our band director that I didn't think I ever wanted to play the bass drum again, no matter where. He just smiled and walked away.

Now I forgot to tell you that I had a good voice. So it was determined that I would be the "voice" of the band when we marched in a stadium. I wasn't consulted, but I was designated.

So, April would arrive and the Buccaneer Days Parade in Corpus Christi; we were invited to march one year. Now Corpus wasn't that far and the parade was at night.

Weather-wise April can be varied. It can be cold, it can rain, it could be humid, and we were blessed with it being a little of all

of these in Corpus. And of course, there were horses.

I have no idea how long the parade lasted or how far we marched. I can tell you that in those days, in our band, the base drum player was expected to keep up the beat so marching in step was easier.

At some point in this parade the muscles in my right arm (I'm right handed of course) began to ache. Fortunately the base drumstick had a leather wrap for my wrist so I didn't drop it. I can't begin to recall how often I changed hands, but it seemed endless.

Not only did that seem endless, but also so did the marching and the parade. Just when I thought it was coming to the end, we turned the corner to the right and we were on the waterfront with hundreds of more parade attenders.

It ultimately ended, thankfully. To the best of my memory we returned home that night by bus. I appealed to Mr. Elkins that we buy one of the marching drums that was just the drum skin or one of those small ones.

Sadly for me, we never got a smaller drum. However, to the best of my recollection I didn't have to carry the drum again.

Lupe Eats *matzah* for Passover

Being one of those folks who finished junior high in December, I headed to high school in January. On the way to my first day

at San Jac after finishing Pershing, my father regaled me with stories from my brother's days at San Jac.

Fred B. Kessler was a late 40's grad from SJ and went on to UT in the days before it was called "at Austin" and medical school in Galveston. Unlike my brother, I was not a jock nor active in high school politics till I served as my senior class president. He was a very popular student in high school and college as well as a jock.

However, my lack of direct activity didn't keep me from taking note of those folk who were running for office when I arrived to begin my high school experience.

So, when I arrived at San Jacinto, the large majority of the students attending were Hispanic, the Anglos were a minority and the Jewish kids very much a minority. The very nice thing about the mix of the school was that folk seemed to get along. And, it is to that I would comment. As I was walking down the first-floor hallway, I couldn't help but notice a very large sign stretched across the hall hanging down from the ceiling. It didn't block passage in the hall, but it certainly made its point.

As best I recall the sign read, "Vote for Lupe, he eats *matzah* on Passover."

Wow, the thought came to my mind, "who was Lupe" and why was someone with that name eating the unleavened bread that Jews eat for the weeklong celebration of this festival?

It didn't take me long to find out that Lupe was Lupe Rodriquez

and he was running for cheerleader. I guess he thought it was a way of getting the Jewish kids to vote for him. He certainly got my vote. Moreover, I got to know him and thought he was a great cheerleader and all around good guy and a friend.

What a great school I had come to. Clearly the remaining years lived up to that feeling. San Jac was clearly a blessing.

With that in mind, I want to take a moment to note that among the deceased Veterans of SJHS Class of '67 is a fellow student with whom I was friends. The note I read was "Carlos Contreras – class of '64. Helicopter Crew Chief. Died in Vietnam."

Carlos was a wonderful guy, always friendly and willing to be helpful. He was very devoted to ROTC and certainly was involved with school activities. I don't know if he left a family, but I know he left lives he touched.

As my tradition teaches, may his name continue as a blessing for all who knew him and may we not forget him. So May It Be God's Will.

Truck Horns for my Car

My faith tradition teaches that it is a true blessing to acquire and friend. I was lucky to acquire my dear friend David Schwarz years before my San Jac days. Luckily, we both became Golden Bears in the same year.

David followed one of his lifelong loves, auto mechanics while I

thought I began on a career path toward medical school but which obviously took a different direction. David continued after high school with his career path and retired after decades of owning and operating a very successful auto service business.

This story is just one of many I would share from high school days as it reflects some of the interests and concerns of my generation. Having a car in high school was clearly a goal of most everyone I knew. Of course, only a few folk got what they really wanted.

I remembered looking at the newspapers daily to see what kind of used cars were available. Now and then I'd look at the new cars but realized that was beyond my reach.

At some point my father said that he'd help me get a car when I could get a driver's license. I can assure you that I paid a good deal of attention to the Texas driving license laws and when you could obtain one.

Fourteen was the magic age for a hardship license and I got that certificate. Pleasantly surprised, my father told me he'd keep his word and help me get a car. I was beyond excited. I had a list of vehicles for my father to consider: a '57 Chevy, a convertible, bright red color ... and the list went on. He considered all of them and even took me to look at different dealerships.

Then one Friday evening he came home from work and told me that we would get a car tomorrow. When I asked to which

dealership we were going, he told me that the car was being brought to us.

Wow, what a surprise. I hardly slept that night. And then came Saturday late morning and the car arrived.

To say that it wasn't a '57 Chevy would truly be an understatement. To call it a high school kid's dream car would be an even greater overstatement.

There in front of our house was a 1960 green Ford Falcon. Well it wasn't a '57 Chevy or a convertible, but it was a car. It was a two door, it did not have white wall tires, but it did have an AM radio and it had an automatic transmission.

But, it had no air conditioning.

However, to my surprise I was told that it was a gift from my parents to me and that I didn't have to pay for any part of it. Of course, I would have to agree to the original arrangement that I would run errands, provide transportation for my grandfather who lived with us and pay for most of the gasoline and service.

And this is where my friend David comes into the picture. Clearly there was a certain degree of disappointment. There is really no question but that I wasn't enthused about a 2 door, Ford Falcon with no a.c. On the other hand, it did run and it was a car. I learned that my parents paid \$1800, (tax, title, license and undercoating) for the car.

Those were the days of 350 HP, V-8 engines that guys used to

brag could go way over 100 mph. My little Ford had a 100 HP, straight block engine that according to the speedometer could go 85 mph. On the other hand, it did run and it was a car. So now the second issue after the a.c.; how would anyone know I was there and how was I going to keep from being run over by some larger vehicle.

To answer these questions, there needed to be some tests of the car. Highway 59 was there and on parts of the freeway David and I would accelerate the Falcon to its fastest speed.

Disappointingly, 85 mph was about it. Another problem was how quickly the car would get up to that speed. Therein was another disappointment.

Given the size of the engine and its design, there wasn't much if any "pick up and go". More over it seemed that passing another car became more of them taking my efforts seriously rather than them making room. After experiencing that problem all around the city, I was determined to solve it.

After much consideration, my friend David explained that unless I wanted to replace the engine, there wasn't much he could suggest. He also pointed out to me that since there wasn't much room under the hood for a larger engine, that was the major limitation.

Then one evening on the way to the football stadium for a high school game, I experienced a very loud horn that I didn't ever remember hearing before. It was identified to me as an electric diesel horn, very common on large highway trucks.

I knew immediately what I needed: diesel horns on my Ford Falcon. After calls around the city, I found myself at a used parts yard looking at silver coated horns.

In my looking, I found that they usually came in sets of 3 or more and they were huge. Finally I did find a set of two old horns that weren't so immense.

Unfortunately, my friend David and I discovered that there was no way those horns would fit under the hood and I couldn't bring myself to put them anywhere on the body of the car; they surely would look out of place.

So for the next four years, I watched my passing, I stayed more in the right lane than the left, I sweated a lot and I rarely tooted my horn.

On the other hand, it did run and it was a car and it made me more popular in college because I had transportation. It ran well because by then my friend David had his shop and kept me on the road. He still does today.

UT Undergraduate Recollections

Dr. Hubbs who told you that you could not become a rabbit

When I was a senior at UT and decided to apply for HUC Mickey Sills suggested I take some courses that related to seminary like Bible and Hebrew.

So I set out to take a couple of courses the first semester of my senior year. I didn't change my major which was in Zoology and a minor in chemistry. I had to get my registration card signed and off I went to see Dr. Clark Hubbs, a Zoology professor with a specialty in fish to sign my card.

He took a look at the list of courses and asked by I was taking a Bible course and a course in Hebrew. I said, "well, I'm thinking of becoming a Rabbi."

Dr. Hubbs looked at me and said, "a rabbit, you can't become a rabbit."

I respond no sir, a Rabbi, a Jewish minister.

Oh he said, signed the card and said nothing else.

Six years later I am back in Austin as the Hillel Director and was asked to speak at the Congregational Church next to the Co-op and down the street from Hillel.

As I was sitting on the pulpit with the pastor waiting for folk to get seated, in walked Dr. Hubbs. Obviously, he didn't recognize me, but I decided to recognize him.

So during my sermon, I commented that in my days at UT, I learned a great deal in Dr. Clark Hubb's class, though in reality I never had him in a course, only as an advisor. The poor guy bolted up and just stared at me. Afterward he asked if I was one of those guys who always bothered him about Jewish festivals conflicting with examinations. I could honestly tell him I never did have that problem with him. Obviously, I never told him that I wasn't in his class.

Parking permit

How I got a on campus parking permit for 4 years. I hate to pass this thought along, but when I was a freshman at UT in 1964, I was told by the dermatologist that I had a candida fungal infection in my "crotch". He gave me "Castellani's paint" that was red and stained all my underwear red. The guys in the fraternity house gave me my own stall in the large bathroom so no one else would get it.

I'm 74 and I still have that fungus for which I use anti itch ointment. The good news back then was that I was told walking was bad for the rash.

So, the doc gave me a note to allow me to have a car in spite of the Freshman car ban in those days.

More over the note got me an “A” parking permit ON CAMPUS, and on Inner Campus Drive.

When the head of the Student Health Center gave me the permit, he told me that he’d better not ever see me at a Student Union dance as it would be bad for the rash (skin rubbing.)

I remember my internal smile in that if I, a frat guy showed up at the Union dance, I’d have been blackballed from my fraternity. He never saw me there. And, I had the permit for 4 years parking on Inner Campus Drive in front of the UT Tower.

How I arrived at UT

Once I had been accepted at UT, two things had taken place which shaped my first days on campus.

The first was that I had two friends in a Jewish social fraternity on campus to which I wanted to belong. The fraternity was Tau Delta Phi and the friends were Bill Scholl and Richard (Kinky) Friedman.

The three of us went to Echo Hill Ranch, a summer camp in Kerrville, Texas for Jewish kids owned by Richard’s parents. Bill entered UT in September in 1963 and I was due to enter in January, 1964.

Kinky and Bill spread the word around that even though I was short, fat, wore very out of date clothes, and glasses, it would be great for the GPA (grade point average) of the fraternity to

pledge me. They told folk that I had 30 hours of A's in advance placement courses. I actually had 9.

The second event was that my father and I went up to Austin for a couple of days to look for a place for me to live. In those days freshmen had to live in "University approved" housing. That label meant that the facility had an adult living on the premises.

There was only one dorm for men near campus that was air-conditioned but it was full. Everywhere else we looked were OK, but no AC. The University owned men's dorms were the "pits".

At that point, my father was told by Bill and Richard that a fraternity house was "approved" and they were sure I was going to be asked to join. And in for Spring rush, potential members could live in the house. So, with significant fear, I arrived on campus and moved into the fraternity house – rooming with Bill.

Thankfully, I was asked to pledge, actually by two fraternities, but I quickly accepted TDF.

I remember that in those days students pledged fraternities and sororities based on religion; essentially Jewish and Christian. It was an old practice so that kids could find their future mates in college.

As a result, on the day of rush began, the men were sent to Gregory Gym to sign up for rush. After entering the gym, there

was a sign that said, “all Jews to the balcony.” That was where the four Jewish fraternities were gathered to meet the rushees.

Tau Delta Phi

I remained a member of Tau Delta Phi until my senior year when I decided to quit. Part of it had to do with money and the other was that I had lost interest in the fraternity. My main interest became the B’nai B’rith Hillel Foundation in my last year as I decided to apply to rabbinical school and not medical school.

TDF was the normal fraternity. It offered social activities, comradery, a place to eat and sleep; in essence, a place to belong on a large college campus. In this case, the main tie was that all the guys were Jewish.

Like other frats, I was a pledge for the first semester where I was at the call of any “active” (full member) of the house. The best way to survive that was to not be too visible, particular if you wanted to study. Since I was sharing a room in the house with my friend Bill, who became an “active” at the beginning of the Spring semester, he cooperated by hiding me.

However my pledging did include being paddled, rallying, being made into a giant birth day cake, left out in a deserted part of Austin in my underwear to get back as best I could, serenading some lady pinned by a fraternity brother, cleaning the house, and attending fraternity hosted social events.

Like other “approved” organizations, the University (functioning under the law of in loco parentes) could authorize beer and liquor parties even though most participants were under age. It certainly made for popular parties.

A Pledge at Hillel

My first week on campus, after I pledged TDF, I decided to go to Hillel for Shabbat evening services. Not knowing how to appear, I attended in a coat and tie, and with my pledge pin proudly on the coat.

The service and the rabbi were terrible. I didn’t know anyone there and I didn’t choose to remain afterward. When I got back to the fraternity house, I was paddled by my pledge master. As he was hitting me on the butt, he lectured me that he never wanted to see a TDF pledge pin in the geeky Hillel Foundation. I didn’t go back till I had quit TDF.

UT Politics and the Fraternity

The fraternity was active in politics on campus and in town. The semester I arrived I was enlisted to hand out “pickles” (plastic pins) for J.J. “Jake” Pickle who was running for the US House representing Austin. I remember standing on the corner in the rain in downtown Austin saying vote for Pickle and handing folk a pin. He won.

Then there was Kinky (Richard) Friedman who dragged me out

of bed early in the morning to picket a drugstore that really didn't sell drugs, rather it cashed checks. However, they would not cash the checks of Black students and so we stood outside protesting. Candidly I don't remember what happened.

One of our members, Lee Hartman, zI, ran for Arts and Sciences Assemblyman in the campus Student Assembly. We created a campaign of cute girls in shorts, wearing a cigarette tray like from a night club giving away cigarettes that had "Lite up for Lee" on each one. Since I had this great parking permit, I painted both sides of my car with the phrase "lite up for Lee" and left it on campus every day before the election. Lee won the race and the fraternity paid for an Earl Schibe (\$29.95 paint job) for my Ford Falcon because we couldn't erase the words.

In my second year (I did UT in 3 ½ years to make up for being January '64 graduate) in the Spring, our pledges peed on the Alpha Epsilon Pi fraternity house. Instead of just doing it on the lawn for what was called "good color" (mild pranks), they opened the slide through mail box and peed on the hallway floor of the fraternity.

They filed charges against us and for some reason which I don't remember, I was designated to defend us at a meeting of the Dean of Students and the Interfraternity Council. They had the authority to kick us off campus. I'm not sure how I pulled this off, but I got us off with a \$100 fine. I vaguely remember that I knew one of the 3 members of the Council and convinced them any more severe punishment and we'd have to close.

The result of my effort for the frat and the peeing, I was elected

Consul (president) of the Fraternity. In those days, it was classy to wear an alligator belt, but I didn't own one; they were expensive. However, the fraternity bought me a belt the week before "rush week" began in the Fall so I would look appropriate.

During my term as president, the pledges held a funeral for a cricket that had been stepped on. Visiting the house that night was an ex-member who was an "ace" pilot in Viet Nam and was on leave. When he saw the "murder", he demanded a funeral and kaddish. And so it was.

It was also when we had a Jewish house mother (the lady there when I was a freshman was not Jewish) named Hanna Krieger. She was a nice lady, but she also served bacon wrapped hotdogs for lunch. So much for *kashrut*.

It was also the time of the song "Banana Bana Fo Fana" and from that I received the nickname that started as KesKes and ended up as KissTits (KT) which I carry today some 50+ years later. Guys used to send me mail at HUC-JIR addressed to Rabbi Kiss Tits Kessler.

My lab partner in Comparative Anatomy, Herb Lieman (today a Neurologist in Dallas) decided to buy a "black market" "prepared for dissection cat" from a Jewish student who worked in the Zoology department.

However, when we paid for the cat, brought it back to the fraternity house to study for the final, we found it was so anomolied that we could hardly study from it. Guess he got

even.

My fraternity brother/apartment mate Mark Bierner (PhD in Botany and professor at UT Austin now) and I took a Tues, Thurs, Sat Organic Chemistry class just to have Dr. Gerhard Fonken. He only recently died. He was a wonderful teacher and later became Provost of UT. Everyone thought we were crazy, but we learned a lot.

When Mark and I and Richard Goldberg and Sandy Weiner were living together, I found us a duplex in west Austin. I put down a deposit and we were all set to go. Then a while later, I was told that they were returning the money and voiding the contract. Later I learned that the duplex was being rented to Lucy Johnson (LBJ's daughter and husband) and other side to the Secret Service. Many years later, Shelley and I were at an annual meeting of the Philosophical Society of Texas in Austin and Lady Bird Johnson (LBJ's wife) along with Lucy were at the meeting. After visiting with one of her security agents, we went up to them and I told her and her daughter about the duplex. She didn't know the story but enjoyed hearing it. I got a autograph for Andy and Jenny. Jenny later took at course at UT on the LBJ Years and had a chance to be at a lunch with Lady Bird, but didn't have the chance to visit with her.

When I was president of the fraternity, I learned there was a new rabbi at Hillel and he was planning on coming to the fraternity to visit as he had been in Tau Delta Phi while in college. When the day arrived, I had the pledges clean up the downstairs, I put on slacks, a button-down shirt and my president's pin.

When I came down to the living room, I found a man sitting on the couch dressed in shorts, a polo shirt, sneakers with no socks, a goatee, sunglasses and a sports cap. I went up to him thinking he was one of Richard (Kinky) Friedman's friends and I stretched out my hand saying I was Jimmy Kessler, the president of the fraternity and wondered if I could help him. He stood up, stretched out his hand and said, "hi, I'm Rabbi Mickey Sills, the new Hillel Director".

Candidly, Clyde Terry Sills did not look like any rabbi I had ever seen, and he turned out not to be like any other I had met. Since my dad had died that summer, I was looking for someone to visit with and so I began visiting with him. After a number of months, he suggested to me that I really didn't have the soul of a physician, but I'd make a wonderful rabbi. Candidly I thought he was nuts though I did think once that it would be fun to wear a robe at work.

The more he and I visited, the more intriguing it sounded and so I wrote a letter to Yeshiva University about rabbinical studies. They sent me a two-page letter in vowel-less Hebrew.

When I showed it to Rabbi Sills, he doubled over in laughter. That's when he gave me a copy of the catalogue from the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, the Reform seminary. It was in English. The courses sounded interesting and I thought I might apply. So, I took the application home to think about it.

My apartment mates couldn't stop ragging on me. "Kessler a rabbi, wow – how low can Judaism sink?" Or, "is that the same

guy who drank and danced at frat parties”. Well I got p.o’d enough to fill in the app and send it in. I made up an essay that sounded as if I wanted to be a rabbi all my life. Frighteningly, I got accepted. I don’t know who was more surprised, me or Rabbi Sills. I was also accepted a few months before my friend Gene Levy who wanted to be a rabbi since childhood.

At some point I got more interested in Hillel than the fraternity. Moreover I didn’t want to live in the frat house any longer and I really didn’t have the funds. My father left some Houston Light and Power stock that I milked through the rest of college and all of rabbinical school to help pay the bills. I also received \$85/mo from Social Security because my father had paid into it and I was a survivor. That along with some scholarship funds allowed me to finish college and HUC without any debt.

My activity at Hillel got me elected as student president. From my fraternity experience, I knew how to plan parties and programs. I even arranged, with some chutzpah to help, for Theodore Bikel to speak at Hillel on Soviet Jewry the days he was on campus singing. He couldn’t sing for us, but he could speak for the cost of his dinner. That was some fame for me in that day.

Among the odd things of my years on campus reflected both upon my ignorance and my luck. I went to my first “lab practical” thinking it was just to see displays. Outside the door I was handed a clip board with a blank sheet with numbered lines. When I asked, “what was this for?”, I was told, “for the exam, what else?” I didn’t know what a practical was.

Then I found that one of my professors was Theophalis Shickel Painter. He was the first person to number human chromosomes. The trouble was that he was incorrect. The reason was that he used the testes of mental patients in state hospitals in Austin who were castrated because they were determined to be crazy.

No one knew in those days that some mental problems came from aberrant numbers of chromosomes. However, it was a hoot to have him as a teacher in cellular biology. I was a grader for two different professors. I got paid but only got to grade multiple choice tests; grad students graded essays.

In my senior year I decided I'd better take Hebrew. Obviously, I was in the first semester course. I had the chair of the division's wife, Mrs. Aaron Bar Adon. When she learned that one of the Jewish girls in the class was going to go to the Arab Students dance, she asked that I convince the girl not to do so. She told me that all Arab men just want to ravage Jewish girls. The girl and I got a good laugh out of that.

I am not a jock, though I am the son of a jock, so physical education in college was not desired. However, I had to take PE and so I thought I would sign up for gymnastics in order to lose weight.

The first day of class, I was told that I could not leave class until I stood on my head. Three guys helped me up and down and afterward I could hardly walk. I never went back.

I got the parking permit instead. In that senior year, I took a

yearlong course in Jewish philosophy. I never took philosophy and I sure didn't know what Jewish philosophy was about. However, I did take the class with my friend whom I met at Hillel Gene Levy. He too wanted to be a rabbi and he was a Hebrew and Philosophy major.

Well, he knew what the course was about, and I never knew what the professor was saying. His name was Moshe Schwartz and was a visiting professor from the Hebrew University. He was an award-winning scholar – Israel Book Prize and was a student trained in Europe as a teenager but fled to Israel. Anyhow, I barely passed the first semester, the second was harder. Moreover, we had to write a paper and take an exam the second semester.

After Gene and I completed both, we went to check on our grades. It so happened that Dr. Schwartz was just walking into his office as we were walking by. He invited us in and began with Gene. He told him that his paper on Nachman Krochmal was outstanding and clearly made an A on the final; hence, an A+ in the course.

Then he turned to me and said, “Mr. Kessler I don't think anyone has ever referred to the change in Hermann Cohen's philosophy as his “metamorphosis”. And, I don't think you understood the questions on the final; your answers weren't very good. HOWEVER, I know you are entering HUC-JIR and I'm sure they will see to it that you know something, so I'm giving you an A- to send you off on a good start.” All the way across campus, I reminded Gene that UT did not recognize +s and -s; so, we both got A's.

HUC Recollections

In my day, to be admitted to HUC-JIR the candidate met with a psychiatrist. I think the school used to look for any hidden major emotional problems, and to ferret out gays. The idea of seeing the same doc did not exist in my day. Instead I was sent to a nearby doc that the Cincinnati shrink knew. In my case, the doc was in San Antonio.

I remember driving from Austin on a cold day wondering what this person was going to ask me. His name was Kennedy and it was a very plain office. He invited me in and I sat down and his first comment was, "I don't know why you're here for me to interview; I don't know anything about Rabbis and actually I'm a Catholic." Well, he went to ask about my family and since my father had died the year before he asked how I was handling it.

He wondered if I had put on weight in response to his death and I told him no, I had always been fat. He asked about my sex life, my dating, my friends and if I had any psychological problems I could identify. He never asked me about religion, God, seminary or the like. I guess he was serious when he questioned the reason of his selection as my interviewer. It may have been a put on, but it didn't seem that way. Anyhow, I guess I passed. I was admitted.

Years before I went to HUC-JIR, entering students went to a large private home with spacious grounds called Towanda. As a result, the program retained the name even though the program moved to the Cincinnati campus where there was a

dormitory that could house and feed the students. The Towanda program is what brought me to Cincinnati in the summer of 1967.

Part of the tradition was that the entering students ended the summer program with a play complete with characters, music and costumes. We decided to do a play about our summer experiences. Not only would we be there, but so would the summer faculty as well as any regular faculty who were in town and any students who had come back early.

One of the components of the play was an acting out of the scene where women who attended the University of Cincinnati (across the street) were invited over for a Shabbat meal and hopefully meet someone for a shidach. In one particular case, one of the several girls who attended one Friday made me look small. As a result, after the ladies had left, it was decided to refer to her as Beverly (her real name) b'heymah (beast in Hebrew).

So, in the play, I dressed in a tutu, a bra, a mop head dyed yellow and I was the date of one of my classmates, Danny Syme. We sat at a table and he ate very daintily while I devoured a chocolate ice box pie with my fingers smearing it all over my face. David Leib, zl (a student teacher) and Dr. Nelson Glueck, zl (president of the college) both slide out of their seats laughing at the scene. Not a bad introduction to the rosh yeshivah.

When my father died in my sophomore year of college, I traded in my Ford and his Chevy for an Opal station wagon. I

convinced my mother to do that since it was smaller, got better mileage and could be serviced at every Buick dealer in the country.

All was fine; I liked the car. I got my acceptance notice to HUC-JIR in Cincinnati and Gene Levy was going to drive up with me. We thought that since I had a station wagon, it could carry all our stuff. Even though Gene hadn't driven a floor shift before, after practicing in Austin, he was fine.

So, I came to San Antonio to get Gene; we loaded the car; spent the night and left early on Saturday. Somewhere outside of Nashville, we began to hear a grinding noise; it was about 11:30 AM. We stopped at a foreign car place and the guy listened and told me the differential gear was going out.

When I inquired if I could still drive the car to Cincinnati, he told me NO as when the gear froze, it could flip the car. When I asked if he could fix it, he told me if he could get the part, he could. He had told me that the Buick dealerships, 2 of them, were already closed, but he knew the parts folk and was sure he could get the gear.

After calling everyone he could think of, he confessed that none of them had the gear in stock. And, they would have to order it from their "district warehouse" which was in CINCINNATI! Wonderful, just where we needed to be.

Now I forgot to point out that we were told in our letter of acceptance that if we weren't present at 6 pm on the following Sunday, our seat in the class would be given to someone else.

So ... we pulled into a bar and had two Cokes. In the middle of one of them, Gene said, “why not carry it to Cincinnati?” At first we laughed, and then I thought, “why not?”

We roughly measured the car and I turned to the phone booth and looked up a truck rental company, called and asked if they had a truck that would hold a Opal. They hung up on me.

Then I tried U-Haul, but before I asked the question, I told them it wasn't a joke nor a prank. After giving him the dimensions, he told me that he had a truck that would hold such a load. And we were on our way.

The first problem we encountered when we arrived at the U-Haul place was how to get the car up into the truck. The clerk was very helpful and after doing all the paper work, drove with us to the railroad station. There we found a loading ramp that 18wheelers used. We backed the truck up to the flat end and then drove the Opal into the back of the truck.

We returned to the shop where the clerk nailed 2x4's behind the 4 wheels to keep the car from rolling backward. We had parked the car in gear and with the emergency brake so rolling wasn't expected. Pictures were taken of everyone there with the truck and car – and we then set off for HUC-JIR and Cincinnati to become rabbis.

It was early afternoon, so we covered a goodly number of miles. Gene had never driven a truck but got used to it after a while. As it was getting dark, we realized that we were out in nowhere, so we stopped at a small motel where each room was a

separate “teepee”. Yep, it looked like an Indian camp, but each had a front and back door, as well as beds, a toilet and a shower.

The next morning it was raining but we headed off with plenty of time to get to Cincinnati. As a matter of fact, we made two sightseeing stops. One was at Ft. Knox to see the gold depository. Then unfortunately we got on the wrong road which trailed off to a dirt path and sign saying, “Danger, Heavy Artillery Practice Range.” Trying to get off the base, a very adamant soldier told me to move my truck to a parking lot before he would tell me how to get out of Ft. Knox.

In addition to Ft. Knox, we also stopped in Louisville at the Kentucky Derby racetrack. As we were looking around the track itself, we found an old broom and there are now pictures in the American Jewish Archives of us pretending the broom was a horse and we were each crossing the finish line.

As we took the turnoff to HUC on Clifton Avenue from the interstate, there was a large billboard with a sign that read, “Smooth as Silk KESSLER”. I later learned it was a local bourbon and that sign remained there for all five years I was in Cincinnati. So it really wasn’t a greeting for me.

Finally, around 3 PM we pulled into the parking lot of the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion. A lady came out, who we later learned was Ruth Frankel, the director of the dorms, and told us that all deliveries were in the back. She let out a mild shriek when she saw what was for delivery from the back of the truck.

Apparently, word got around that Gene was there as two of his friends from UAHC camp came out, Steve Westman and David Weiss. They, too, were in the entering class and were also surprised at the “baggage.”

After some search we found that we could get the car out of the truck at the city jail where there was an appropriate ramp and that I could get the car to the Buick dealer near the school on Monday.

The last event for that day was that word spread around the school that the Jews from Texas were so rich, they drove their car into a truck and drove a truck to Cincinnati to spare the rubber on their tires.

The next day I limped the car to the Buick dealer. They confirmed that it was the differential gear, but they had none in stock. Apparently, the vehicles in the States were having similar problems and the supply had been used up. As a result, a large supply was on back order to Berlin, West Germany. When I asked when I might expect some to arrive, the manager, a Jew, suggested maybe by Yom Kippur.

Gene Levy and stayed there for the summer but came back to Texas for a break before the holy days.

Upon our return as we were crossing the bridge over the Ohio River from Kentucky into Cincinnati, I noticed a jeep on the grass esplanade with 3 men in it along with a mounted machine gun. On closer look, I noticed the driver was a civilian policeman and the other two were in military uniform.

We turned on the radio and found that Cincinnati was under martial law due to race riots. And, the dividing line on the riots was across the street from HUC-JIR where the University of Cincinnati campus began.

In addition to the periodic marching of students, one night a car was turned over on the lawn of HUC and set on fire. As I watched this occur from the dorm, I wondered what I was doing in this place.

Thankfully it settled down over a few days and the martial law was cancelled

In my letter of acceptance to HUC-JIR, I was told to report on Sunday for a placement exam in Hebrew. During the drive up, Gene Levy gave me a great education in Hebrew albeit very basic. Most of my language classes were Spanish with only one year of college Hebrew.

When we arrived at HUC-JIR and had returned the UHaul truck, we found our room that we would share that summer and Gene began to review me. After supper, we were called to one of the lounge rooms to be examined by one of the summer instructors to see which level we'd be in.

The teachers for the summer program were 5th year Rabbinic students. The instructor who tested me was Rabbi David Leib, zl, but not yet a Rabbi in those days.

He handed me a Bible, told me to turn to the first page and begin reading. Fortunately, it was one of the pages Gene and I

worked on and I thought I had done well.

David's response was to burst into laughter. He excused himself and went out to get the other teachers. All of them heard me read and bumped in to each other as they ran out of the room laughing and looking for Dr. Kravitz, director of the summer program.

The door opened again and Dr. Julius Kravitz, professor from the NYC campus and director of the summer program came in with the teachers.

After hearing me read the same verses for the third time, Dr. Kravitz told me I would be in the beginning class and I would report to him the following morning after breakfast.

The following morning, he informed me that I would be in the next to the lowest class and IF I passed the summer courses, I would be expected to see the Speech professor in the Fall for a private tutorial.

"Mr. Kessler," he said, "if you're going to succeed as a Rabbi, you are going to have to lose that sound. No one wants to hear that Texas twang."

I was taken aback, to say the least. However, I did pass the summer program, and I did begin the Fall semester. A week or so into the school year, I received a note from Professor McCoy, the Speech instructor that I was to call him for an appointment.

The date and time were set, and I arrived on time. After brief

introductions, he read over a note that I guessed was from Dr. Kravitz.

A moment or two later, he began, “Mr. Kessler, I’m glad you came by to visit. You will be in my introductory speech class like all the other first year students. I don’t see any need for you to meet with me privately. As to the Texas ‘twang’ in your voice, I’m sure there are hundreds of synagogues both in and out of Texas that would enjoy hearing it from the pulpit. Have a nice day.”

Professor McCoy, got up, shook my hand and opened the door signaling that it was time for me to leave. The memorable last moments were filled with his chuckling at the note he received.

So among those in the summer HUC program were 3 or so who were engaged and would be married by the time class began in the Fall. So to help them celebrate we went out for pizza and then to the Gaiety Theater.

At the pizza parlor near the University of Cincinnati, we ordered beer with the pizza. It was then that a number of us learned about three-two beer. The taste was sort of like left over, old beer or maybe urine if any of us had tasted that. At any rate, it was a “weak beer” for folk under 21.

Though we were pleased to be considered below drinking age, we soon had that issue corrected.

We then went to the Gaiety Theater which was an old theater in Cincinnati that had fallen on hard times and had become a strip

joint. Give or take 15 of us bought tickets, probably paying the weekly bills. We chose to attend because the “headliner” stripper was Dallas. That loosened my old fraternity behavior and I was bragging about how good she had to be if her name was Dallas.

The inside was old, needed repair but it certainly was large. There was some kind of asbestos backdrop with old drawings on it. We filled an entire row and waited for the performance to begin. Maybe there were 4 or 5 other folk in the theatre.

After a few moments, about 6 or 8 other guys came down the aisle and took the row in front of us. They seemed younger than most of us and looked like college students.

One fellow turned to me and asked if we were from a fraternity. I couldn't help myself, and so I responded, “we are, we're from roe-alpha-beta-beta-iota”. The kid looked at me and said, “rabbi, are you guys rabbis?”

At that instance, all I could think of was the headline in the next day's Cincinnati Inquirer – “first year class of the Hebrew Union College arrested in strip joint raid”!

After a moment or two, the kid laughed and told me that they were all from Mount St. Mary's Seminary and were studying for the Roman Catholic priesthood! No wonder he understood the Greek letters I knew from frat days.

We all had a good laugh, watched the show – which was terrible- and went our separate ways.

Now I'll own up to being a bourbon sipper from college days. However, I had never heard of "Smooth as Silk, Kessler Bourbon". Of course, I shouldn't be expected to know about a liquor that is brewed in Cincinnati, Ohio even if it was named Kessler.

I didn't think much of it. I couldn't imagine that Kessler was a relative but how would I know it would matter. A few weeks later, I found that a good department store in town was Shilito's and they owned Foley's in Houston. So, I went downtown to get a credit card.

Now I should also say that I did get a job. I was hired as a Sunday School teacher at Isaac Wise Temple. I was being paid \$25 a Sunday.

So, I appeared at the Customer Service window and turned in the completed credit card application. The lady looked at my employment section and at me and took a breath. I presumed I was about to be declined when she looked up at me and said, "Smooth as Silk". I smiled and said "yep".

As I left with my temporary credit card, I realized how well known was the Kessler name, even if they weren't relatives. Interestingly, that "Smooth as Silk Kessler" sign remained up for my five years in Cincinnati.

To this day, I have a "Smooth as Silk, Kessler" sign in my office.

Of the many things I found in Cincinnati, Ohio that we did not have in Texas was a Playboy Club.

I had never been to one, but that didn't keep me, Gene Levy and David Weiss from visiting one evening. I don't know what I expected, but it was in a downtown office building. Essentially it was a restaurant with a stage and bar. It also had a more secluded dining area away from the stage.

When we got back to the dorm at HUC, we decided we would join under one name, but the other two could use it when they wanted. We drew for the short straw (as I remember it) but regardless, Gene Levy won the option and so the membership was in his name.

I can't speak for the other guys, but I don't remember using it other than one more time in my last month in school, just for the fun of it.

It was just the fun of being able to say I belonged to a Playboy Club.

When I entered Rabbinical School, I didn't have much money. My father died in my junior year of college and between working and Social Security I was able to return to UT Austin and complete my degree.

My mother was alive, and she was able to help out a bit. Congregation Emanu El in Houston had a Sisterhood scholarship that assisted with living expenses in the dorm. Clearly, I knew I needed to earn some extra funds.

So, the first job I got was teaching religious school on weekends. I had no other obligations, but I knew I needed time

to study and I didn't know enough Hebrew yet to teach that topic. However, I was lucky, and I did get a Sunday morning of teaching in the Isaac Mayer Wise Temple.

I looked around for an additional job that might pay well and wouldn't take too, too much time. It was the Fall and there was a large department store, Shilitos, in downtown Cincinnati.

Obviously, Christmas was coming to town and I had all the equipment "built in" to play Santa. So I went down to the store and I put in an application to play Santa Claus. Obviously, I listed the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion as my school and residence. That was a mistake!

Now it wasn't a mistake in regard to the store and what they thought, rather it was my reference. The store did call HUC-JIR and asked the Dean about me. He had no problem in recommending me for the job.

However, word got around the school and it turns out that one faculty member in particular was incensed at what I wanted to do. So, he took it upon himself to call the store and tell them that it wasn't proper for them to hire a Rabbinic student to play Santa.

Obviously, that's all it took. I got a note from the store thanking me for my interest but indicating that the openings had already been filled.

I thought about punching out the professor, but I was advised that such would not be tolerated by HUC. So, I found a better

job elsewhere. You'll read about it in these pages.

My last year at HUC-JIR, the first year in Israel for entering students was instituted. Prior to that time, students came to campus in Cincinnati the summer before first year classes began where they learned Hebrew grammar and how to translate TaNaK and sefer haagadah. If one was more advanced, you began translating Mishnah.

Clearly, I was a beginner who knew nothing. So I only studied grammar and Bible.

Once the first trimester began, we had a course in Hebrew Grammar. Our professor for grammar was Dr. Werner Weinberg, a Holocaust survivor with a doctorate in Hebrew Literature. Classes met in the classroom building which was not air-conditioned in those days.

As we were waiting for the first meeting of the Fall Grammar class, Norman Lipson commented that Dr. Weinberg had to be a "yeh-key". I had never heard the term and so he explained that his father, a Cantor and mohel, always said to be careful of yeh-keys. They were the folk who dotted their "I's" twice and crossed their "t's" twice. Also, they were the folk who checked phone books for errors in the phone numbers.

Yeh-key was the term which Eastern European Jews called German Jews. It was clearly a pejorative.

When I asked how you recognized a yeh-key, I was told that you could easily recognize them as they wore suspenders and a belt

at the same time.

A few minutes later Dr. Weinberg walked in – a small frame, older man, in a suit and tie, carrying a brief case. He introduced himself, placed his case on the desk and proceeded to take off his coat – it was hot.

Suddenly the class broke into hysterics. Norman and Danny Syme slid out of their chairs onto the floor laughing while the rest of us tried to stifle our hoots.

Now I think we did not admit to why we were laughing, but we might have.

However, five years later when we were seniors, several faculty members hosted parties in our honor in that semester of school before ordination. One of those parties took place at Dr. Weinberg's home.

As I was walking around looking at the nick knacks, I found myself standing next to Professor Weinberg. I'm not sure what possessed me to say anything, but I reminded him of that incident 5 years before in Towanda. And then, I explained to him the cause was the term "yeh-key" which many of us had not heard before.

When I got to the belt and suspenders, he got a big smile on his face and told me, "Jimmy, I'm proud to be a yeh-key". "See" and he opened his coat and there was a belt and suspenders. We both had a good laugh. I never told him that I was ½ yeh-key, but maybe he already knew that.

After a while, the joke about me was that I arrived at HUC with my rabbinic thesis already written. I always seemed to speed ahead through assignments.

Sometimes to no avail.

In my first year, we had a yearlong course in translating TaNaK where we read material in Hebrew and translated it into English applying the Hebrew grammar we were learning. Though it was slow and tedious at first, it certainly gave us an ability to handle text.

In that class, our teacher was Rabbi Jay Holstein, an HUC ordainee who was working on his PhD. He was a good guy but demanding in his work. Essentially, we were reading a narrative portion of the Book of Samuel which included a goodly number of battles.

Rabbi Holstein told us at the beginning of the course to begin keep a journal of the battles that were being fought, and all the particulars about the battles. Candidly we had plenty of work to do and so no one was keeping that journal; except me.

I was so scared because I knew so little that I was afraid to not do the work. Sometime in December, one of my classmates asked if were to still keep the running commentary on the battles we studied. He smiled and said “nah, that was just to keep you on your toes.”

It was only one example of my over zealousness that gave my classmates a laugh.

The other most memorable event was when Dr. Sandmel assigned us to read a goodly number of articles on Bible from the Jewish Encyclopedia during the winter break. I went home to Houston and found that my family's synagogue had the necessary set of books.

So, I dutifully read all the articles, typed up copious notes and returned to Cincinnati after the new year. When classes resumed, Dr. Sandmel began his class by asking who in the class was the shnook who read all the articles.

I raised my hand. He asked if I made copies for anyone who wanted them. I told him that I had. He smiled and told me that he was the one in his class who had done the same thing except that they didn't have copying machines in the library in those days.

This time, it was a pleasure. Moreover, it gave me a closer tie to Rabbi Sandmel.

Our first year class was also expected to do a play for the graduating seniors during the 2 or 3 weeks before Ordination.

The trouble was that at that same time, we were studying for the first round of year end exams. These took place the first and second year and consisted of sight passages (verses you've never seen) in each genre of Jewish literature studied that year.

You had to read and translate the material along with an explanation. If you failed one of the five, you could repeat it. If you failed two or more, you had to repeat the year. We were a tad bit worried.

So we came up with the idea of a pantomime play so no lines had to be learned and the music was recorded background music so we didn't have to sing. My job was to play the "sugar plumed fairy" and dance on tip toes across the stage with a feather duster saturated with baby powder and when I shook it, it made a haze. And since we were using a flicker light, it was a great way to change scenes. So, several times that evening I got up and tripped the light fantastic. I wore the same tutu and yellow mop head, but added galoshes, long underwear dyed pink, and my handy duster. I did well and was cheered on.

When I arrived in Cincinnati in 1967 I was taking allergy shots. Actually, I was giving them to myself. I was told that wouldn't be permitted and that I had to use the HUC medical student. The school gave free room and board to a University of Cincinnati med student to be available for minor medical needs and in an emergency. I don't know what year he was in but I went as I was told and gave him a vial and a disposable syringe. He proceeded to fill the syringe, stick in my arm and promptly broke off the needle in my arm, something I managed never to have done in over a year. I never said anything, he never said anything, and I never came back to him.

I went to Israel on the American Friends of the Hebrew University program in the summer of 1968 and stayed till the summer of 1969. Though I was registered as a student at the HU, I took courses at the HUC-JIR campus in Israel, then called the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology.

It started because my classmate Lewis Bornstein lived down the hall from me in the dorm. He had a tv and I had a car. So I

would get us pizza and we'd watch tv in his room. Though he knew gads more Hebrew than me, we both thought that if we were going to do well at HUC, we needed to know the language better.

Lew knew of the American Friends program, but we were told that HUC would not allow us to leave for the second year. As a matter of fact, if you left for Israel, they dropped you from the school rolls and reported you to your local draft board; that could mean Viet Nam.

Unbeknownst to me, Lew went to Dr. Weinberg, the director of the first-year program, and told him that if we weren't granted permission to leave, we would drop out of HUC. Good thing I didn't know as I would never have tried that approach.

However, it worked. Each of us got a note from Dr. Weinberg granting us a one year leave to go to Israel but noted that we would receive no credit for any work we did there.

So that summer I took a train to New York, just to see what it would be like. What a terrible mistake. None the less, I made it and Lew and I left for Israel on a chartered plane. Candidly, though I had done OK in the first year, even in liturgy, I wasn't quite ready for the guys who got up every time the sun switched sides of the plane to daven a service.

We arrived with me sick and we were put up in a youth hostel as the dorm rooms at the HU weren't ready. As a matter of fact, the workmen would arrive when we left each morning, after we moved in, to finish the building.

Egged buses were the main form of transportation, not cars. The problem was that the buses around the campus were always overcrowded. After being left in the rain on many occasions, Lew persuaded me that we needed a “motor scooter”.

OK, I agreed. I once had a Lambretta scooter and it was fun and not too expensive. However, Lew wasn’t satisfied with a scooter; he arrived at HUC in Cincinnati on a “motor cycle.” So, he showed up with a 1937 British BSA that had a sidecar and that had been brought to Palestine during the Mandate period.

He told me we needed the power to carry us both. Later we added Pamela, his now wife, as a regular passenger and that’s how we went around Jerusalem when the weather wasn’t nice and buses were crowded.

There were several other HUC rabbinic students there for the year, but all were 3rd year and above. We were the only two beginners.

The Dean of the Jerusalem campus was Rabbi Ezra Spicehandler who had a PhD in Talmud. He spent his high school years in Israel and was one of the few students trained in ROTC in the country in the 1940’s.

Now I was a conniver and rules for me were meant to be interpreted. So one day I sat down with the HUC catalog and worked my way through it. Therein I found that each area of academic specialty included a course in “general studies in ...”. That course number allowed a professor in that area to design a course for a student/s and give them hours credit and grades.

In that year, the only professorial member of the faculty in Jerusalem was Dr. Spicehandler. Now he was a professor of Talmud which meant he could easily offer credit for Talmud, for Midrash, for Aramaic, since we were in Israel, he could also give credit for Hebrew literature and conversation.

Now we weren't close buddies, but we were friendly. And his wife, Bat Sheva (Shirley), was in my ulpan class at HUC. Languages were difficult for her.

Across the street from the HUC campus was a kiosk that sold drinks, sweet rolls and ice cream. Each morning there was a break in classes and we would go to the kiosk for a nosh.

It seemed on a regular basis, Dr. Spicehandler would accompany us and have a soft drink and a Danish. It also seemed that on a regular basis at the same time, his wife would be walking down King David Street to the school, right past the kiosk.

When he saw her approaching, Ezra would slide the Danish in front of me. When Shirley came up, she would chide him about the diet he as supposed to be on. He would normally answer that it wasn't him eating, it was Jimmy.

So, during that year I arranged for him to give Lew and me credit for the required courses in Modern Hebrew, first year Talmud, required Aramaic, and Midrash. By the time Lew and I left, we had letters sign by him giving us an entire year of credit. And, I can assure you I reminded him of the many times I took the blame for his splurges.

We did private work with him, we wrote papers and we even took a course in Classic Aramaic from Professor Kosmala, a friend of Ezra and director of a European school of Biblical research. All this kept us with our class for ordination and we did not lose a year by going to Israel.

Now observing the high holy days in Jerusalem is an amazing experience. Before sunset, we made our way to the Western Wall for RH and the shofar. Candidly I was just too tired to walk back to the other side of Jerusalem afterward – the buses weren't running. So, I convinced Lew and Pam, who had never ridden on the HHD, to take a cab back to the dorm.

Now mind you, this was 1968 and the unification of Jerusalem was new and as no Jewish taxis were working on yuntif, we had to take an Arab cab. Between watching the sky to see if God was going to strike us down for riding, or the Arab driver was going to rob and stab us, my two friends didn't have a peaceful ride back. It was safe with no problems, just disturbing.

I had promised my friend from college and rabbinical school, Gene Levy, that I would be back in the summer of 1969 for his wedding. I did make it. However, I might have been giving up a summer in Europe; after all I was there so why miss it.

However, during the time of Chanukah, I learned that the HU would close for 3 weeks for Spring break. Not only that but there was a sign in a travel agent office that a round trip ticket for students to/from Europe was \$200.00.

No HUC student wanted to go, but I met an undergrad student

in the dorm who was up for a Spring trip to Europe. So off Peter Cohen and I went for 3 weeks, and I saw Europe.

Richard “Kinky” Friedman came to visit me in Jerusalem after he finished his time in the Peace Corps in Malaysia. He stayed a month, wrote some great music like “Ride’em Jewboy”, and spent my money as he came broke; not abnormal for Richard. It was a wonderful time and my roommates liked him much.

Lew and I had two Israeli roommates. Ephraim Weinstock who was a math wiz and skipped the military to get his degrees. He went on to become one of the senior financial folk in the IDF. Our other roommate, Yehudah Sassone wanted to be a radio announcer, but I don’t know what happened to him.

We got along well. They just thought we were strange. After all, rabbis didn’t look like us nor did they act or talk like us. They thought we looked more like dock workers from Haifa.

One of the best offerings of HUC were tours through out Israel. Now they weren’t designed for rabbinic students in those days, but for the Christian graduate students who came for a year’s study. It was free for them; rabbinic students paid.

If we rabbinic students could afford them, we could participate. I took every one of them except spending the night in the desert at Sinai; I was in Europe at that time. The ministers stayed in nice quarters, and we rabbinic students and wives were put up in junky places, like an old British prison. At times trips almost produced a fist fight, but we made it through.

I think even if I had lost the credit for the year, I would not have regretted the year. It made school work much easier where I could concentrate on the content and not just the language. I learned a great deal about Israel that I could have never learned from a book. And it was a wonderful growth experience, even if we narrowly missed the bombing of a Jerusalem super market.

When I was a third year student in ~1968/70 I received a call one day from a lady who wanted to know if I had ever owned an Opal. At first, I thought it was a joke and then she explained that she had purchased a used Opal station wagon from the local Buick deal and she found my name on the warranty book. My luck. Fortunately, it turned out OK for me. She proceeded to tell me that she had received 4 tickets for having a noisy muffler. She tried the Buick dealer, but they told her they were out and had ordered them from the regional warehouse. Then they explained that the regional warehouse was in Cincinnati but they, too, were out of them. Moreover, the mufflers were on back order to Berlin, West Germany where they were made. She even tried local foreign car shops and the national muffler stores and no one had them. Then she asked if I ever had a problem getting parts.

I tried not to laugh and went into a brief explanation of what got me to sell the Opal in the first place. She never called back to tell me what happened. I didn't try to call her either.

I was in my third year of seminary and was obligated to serve a small synagogue every other weekend. The assignment began in the Fall with the Jewish holy days and would end in May of the next year. At each visit I was provided with an evening meal

by one of the members on Friday and on Saturday.

When December rolled around I was assigned to a family for the second visit of the month. When I arrived at the house, I was met by the wife and ushered into the breakfast room where her mother in law sat with a scowl on her face. Shortly after I sat down, I found that the mother in law did not speak English and all she did was stare at me. The wife was in the kitchen and the husband was on his way home. A lot of silence.

When the husband arrived, he came into the breakfast room sat down and immediately told me that he was not Jewish nor was his mother. When I asked where we were eating, he informed me that he and his mother were not eating with me and his wife. His wife was taking me to a Christmas party where I would find food to eat.

I immediately pictured the president of the temple calling the seminary to say that this woman accused me of rape or assault. None the less I left their house with the woman, in my car. She directed me to some friend's house and as I parked the car she told me that when we walk in the door I was to introduce myself as her friend and not mention that I was her Rabbi.

We arrived at the door and when it opened, she went in first pecking the host on the cheek and telling him I was her "date". As I got to the door, I reached out my hand to the host saying, "hi, I'm Rabbi Jimmy Kessler, I her minister."

She didn't speak to me the rest of the evening and all the way home. The food was terrible.

So here I am this fourth-year Rabbinic student at my student pulpit in Richmond, Indiana. I am staying at a cheap motel owned by a Palestinian Arab who tells me at each visit how the Israelis have taken his family's business in Ramleh.

One Saturday morning around 7AM, there is this very loud rapping on the door. I threw on some clothes and open the door to find a man at least six and a half feet tall and wider than the door looking down at me.

You the Rabbi? Yes, I'm the student Rabbi of Beth Boruk. So, Rabbi, how do you make Jew wine for Passover when you can't ferment anything?

Not knowing how to make regular wine, I had no earthly idea about wine kosher for Pesach.

So trying to sound friendly, I told the man that I really didn't know but it would be my pleasure to find out. Moreover, I told him I would be back in two weeks and if he'd give me his phone number, I'd call with the answer when I returned.

No, I won't give you my number, I'll just come back in two weeks.

I went back to school, found out how to make wine for Pesach, he came back in two weeks with the same rapping on the door, I gave him the answer and he left – with a thank you.

I never saw him again; thankfully.

In the Spring of 1970, some of us were living in a new dormitory on the back corner of the HUC property. It was referred to as “Glueck’s Folly” as it was built presuming a larger student body than ever appeared.

One evening I was heading from the cafeteria carrying some coffee back to the dorm when three police cars surrounded me with their lights flashing.

I was asked through a p.a. system on the car to identify myself and tell them where I was going. I quickly complied only to be told to hurry on my way to the dorm and keep my door locked. I was told that there had been a murder down on Clifton Avenue and that they think the suspect was on the HUC campus.

So I went to my dorm room, and pulled out my .45 ACP pistol and put a loaded clip in the gun. I loaded one shell in the chamber, locked the gun and put another clip in my pocket.

I’ve been a target shooter since I was 14 and since I drove to the school from Houston, I brought my pistol with me.

Not wanting to remain in the dorm alone, I went back to the Sisterhood dorm where the cafeteria was located and I could get some coffee and a nosh.

When I arrived, I found several students sitting with the dorm director. She told us that the security guard was checking out the grounds and we should remain together. Sounded good to me.

A few minutes passed, and an elderly man arrived in a “guard uniform”. He was introduced as the part time security guard and that he was ready to handle anything. With that, he pulled out a .22 revolver and set it on the table indicating that this would take care of any problem.

I couldn’t help it, but ... I reached behind my back, pulled out my .45 (about twice the size of his pistol) and said something like, “well, if you need any help, I’m sure this will do.”

The next morning, I was called to the office of the Dean and told that I was to take the pistol back to Texas and not bring it out while I was still a student.

Fortunately, school was ending and I took the weapon home. The following year, I didn’t live on campus and I had the pistol in my apartment. The Dean never knew.

The pistol packing rabbi!!

In our third year we took a yearlong course in American Jewish History. Rabbi Jacob Marcus was the instructor, the father of American Jewish History, and he was assisted by Rabbi Ken Roseman who was finishing his PhD degree in that field and was serving as the acting Dean of the Cincinnati campus. We were assigned an original research paper that usually consisted of reviewing materials sent to the American Jewish Archives on campus and writing a paper on that data. In this way, Dr. Marcus obtained a summary of material on the cheap.

I received an assignment to review a couple of dozen New

Orleans, LA business journals from the late 1800's. I was to look for Jewish sounding names and if the ads got bigger, I was to presume the businesses did well and if they shrank or disappeared, I was to presume the opposite. This was not my shtick.

When I first arrived in Cinncy in 1967 I was told to go the AJA and look for my family name. The only Kessler's I found were actors in the Yiddish theatre and they had not come from Texas. I also looked under T's to see if there was much on Jews in my home state. There wasn't. However, I noticed a card typed in "red" and was titled the "Split of Beth Israel". When I asked about it, I was told it was a restricted file that couldn't be viewed without permission of Dr. Marcus.

So, three years later when I received this inane assignment, I thought of the "red" card. I made an appointment to see Dr. Marcus and asked about switching topics. He told me that normally he didn't allow that, but since I had told him I was from Emanuel, he agreed to let me write a restricted paper using the material in that file because he liked Rabbi Bob Kahn at Emanu El.

It turned out that the boxes contained the in-house correspondence of Temple Beth Israel in Houston. It went through the issue of Zionism, their membership in the American Council for Judaism, their Basic Principles, the early dismissal of the senior Rabbi Henry Barnston, the by-passing of Rabbi Robert I. Kahn to be the senior Rabbi, the hiring of Rabbi Hyman Schachtel as senior Rabbi due to his membership in the American Council for Judaism and finally the split of Beth Israel

that caused the creation of Temple Emanuel.

This material was sent to the AJA by Mr. Will Nathan, the elected Secretary of Beth Israel. He sided with the group that split and wanted all the story saved. He sent it with a 25-year seal on the documents to give the issues time to quiet down.

Years later I met him when I was the Director of the UT Hillel Foundation in Austin. He had arranged for a gift to Hillel from his sister and it allowed me to share my story with him.

Aside from the known events in each of these areas, I found that there was a conspiracy to remove Rabbi Barnston as he was a Zionist. The folk in power skipped over Rabbi Kahn using the excuse that he was too young to be the senior Rabbi; but the real reason was that he, too, was a Zionist. Beth Israel made the front page of New York Times by disenfranchising anyone who would not promise to keep their Basic Principles indicating they didn't believe in using Hebrew in services, not keeping any dietary laws, believed that Washington was their Jerusalem and the USA was their Israel, and other issues considered to be the core of then classical Reform Judaism. If you didn't sign, you were a member and paid regular dues, but you couldn't vote. The materials I reviewed revealed a secret plan to change the character of Beth Israel, the oldest synagogue in Texas, to an American Council Congregation with an appropriately thinking Rabbi and to be sure it remained that way. Secret meetings were held, surreptitious visits were made by Rabbi Schachtel; Rabbi Kahn was left out of any correspondence (he was in the Pacific serving in the US Army as a chaplain), and appropriately thinking individuals were placed in office to insure these

changes.

Dr. Marcus found the paper outstanding, gave me an A, and said if filled in a lot of material. When I asked if I could show it to Rabbi Kahn, he told me “show” but not “give”. It was restricted.

He wanted me to ask Rabbi Kahn if there was anything in the paper he thought was “wrong.” So I went home and went to see Rabbi Kahn. He was busy. So I left the paper and asked that he call me after he read it. It didn’t take but about 15 minutes to return to my mother’s apartment, but the Rabbi had called 3 times in that period. I needed to return immediately.

I did. As I walked into his office, he bombarded me with questions. However, before I answered any I could, I did as Dr. Marcus required; I asked him if there was anything in the paper he thought was incorrect. He not only said “no” but he wanted to know where I got all the info. Obviously, it was a delightful visit and on my return to school, I left a very happy Dr. Marcus when I filled him in on my visit.

During the summer between my junior and senior year, I stayed in Cincinnati to write my master’s thesis. I shared an apartment with Norman Lipson, one of my classmates. One morning I got a call to come to the Dean’s office as there was a family in the area that needed a Rabbi to officiate at a funeral. I was told that since I was on campus and was now a senior, I could earn \$100 and do the service. When I arrived at the Dean’s office, Rabbi Rosen told me that it wasn’t actually a funeral, it was a cremation. I told him that I didn’t believe in cremation (at that time). He told me that I would have plenty

of time to stand by my opinions after I was ordained, now it was time to earn my keep. So I agreed. So much for principles.

Behind the campus of HUC-JIR in Cincinnati was a crematorium. That's where the service would also be held. So, I appeared at the appointed time and to my surprise, the son-in-law of the deceased was a guy with whom I had been in Cub Scouts at Beth Yeshurun in Houston. Johnny Perel was now a dentist in a small town in Kentucky, across the Ohio River from Cincinnati. We had a nice reunion and stayed in touch for a while.

However,, the real story took place after the service after the family had left. The director of the facility asked if I'd remain; he had a question. He took me to a storeroom and opened a cabinet containing a large bowl full of what I thought was sand. It turned out to be cremains. He explained that a shelf collapsed on which sat several inexpensive glass containers, each containing the cremains of an individual. Now all that material was now mixed. He was wondering how I thought he ought to handle the problem. I dare not tell you what I told him.

At the end of my junior I was offered a job as Assistant to the Director of Admission. It meant that I would work in Rabbi Uri Herscher's office, visit campuses in the country to pre-interview potential students for HUC-JIR and my tuition for the last year would be waived. In addition, I would be a voting member of the Admissions Committee. It was a hoot. There were many times I was just in the office alone when Uri was out of town and the secretary, who he shared, was at other

places on campus. It seemed that once folk were ordained or received their degree, their admission folder was destroyed but the transcript was saved.

Since I was still in school, I noticed that the admission folders for my class were still in the files. So one day I opened the file drawer and pulled out Kessler, James Lee. Opening the folder, I found piece of paper taped to the admission application form with the following: Mr. Kessler is being admitted as an experiment to see if someone without any background in Judaica can make it through our Rabbinic program."

Wow, an experiment. Well I closed the folder and only mentioned it to my study partner, Lewis Bornstein, but otherwise kept my mouth shut. After all, I had no idea if they had decided not to ordain me.

I was ordained in 1972, but it took about 10 years for me to get up the nerve to ask about the topic. Shelley and I were at a Rabbinic convention and Rabbi Ken Roseman was there. Ken had been the acting Dean in Cincinnati while I was a Rabbinic student. He was finishing his PhD and I used to babysit for his kids. Anyhow at breakfast one morning, I sat next to Ken and asked, "was I admitted as an experiment?" Without blinking an eye, he asked, "who told you?" He proceeded to explain that seminaries were beginning to deal with applicants with no background in religion but wanted to be clergy. Some thought it was because Viet Nam was heating up though lottery numbers had not yet started. He reminded me that two other guys were admitted with the same issues and they dropped out. So he suggested that obviously HUC-JIR hadn't made a mistake

with me.

The last year included classes in Jewish legal codes. In as much as the 60's-70's were turbulent times in the country, the curriculum was adjusted to include more practical topics. This even happened in Talmud and Codes.

Our Codes professor was Alexander Guttman, rabbi and PhD. He was an older, German gentleman, and he had been the head of the Talmud department at the liberal seminary in Berlin, Germany - Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, before WW II. Dr. Guttman left Europe and ended up in Cincinnati at HUC-JIR.

The topic in our class was marriage and that topic tripped the issue of people living together without marriage. Now though Judaism allowed for such relations, Jewish parents weren't happy. There were a few ways by which folk could get married, but again the proper form was set out.

One day the issue of living together was brought up and the conversation centered around what we would be called upon to do as community rabbis. The class ended with no conclusions. It was suggested, however, by one classmate that concubines would be a solution.

Two days later at the next class, the topic was resumed. I raised my hand and told Dr. Guttman that I had read about concubines and since it had a time limit, that would solve the problem of the issue of divorce that would no longer be needed. He told me that I should remember that only a king could have

a concubine. Without thinking, I told him that I had read a midrash that said that every Jewish male lived in a king's home.

Dr. Guttmann looked at me and said, "Mr. Kessler, you read too much". He closed his text, picked up his briefcase and walked out of the room. We looked at each other, laughed and left as well. Concubines were not mentioned again.

Periodically a group of visiting high school or college students came to HUC-JIR for a weekend. They came for meals and classes. In those days the meals were served family style and at the end of the evening meal, the birkat hamazone was sung, the long one.

On one Friday night at the dinner after services, Ruth Frankel, the house manager, asked me to sit at her table and lead the prayer. I was a senior at that time. Across the table from me was Professor Werner Weinberg, a teacher of mine who taught Hebrew Literature and Grammar. A gentle, sweet man about 5'3" and probably 135 lbs.

The end of the meal came and at the appropriate time, I clicked the glass for quiet and opened my mouth to begin the birkat. Instead of the birkat coming out, the words of the kiddush came out. Thankfully Dr. Weinberg began singing the correct prayer a little louder and as he continued, he pulled out a small bencher (pocket edition of the multipage prayer). When it was all over, he laughingly taught me to never, ever do anything from memory while a Rabbi. Anything can distract you and you'll embarrass yourself. I can assure you I never deviated from his advice after that night.

In my last year of rabbinical school, I had crept up to 310 pounds. I knew I had to do something about that weight. What congregation would want to hire me at 300 pounds?

The wives of the married students at HUC did not like the obstetrician that the school recommended and paid for. As a result, they went to Dr. Ach, a general practitioner who had a small office in North Cincinnati. He was Jewish though I don't think he practiced the tradition very much, and so he didn't charge very much for HUC students.

It was amazing that guy's wives didn't gain a lot of weight while they were pregnant. He even helped them lose weight. So, I decided to go see him.

When I arrived at his office I was less than impressed, to say the least. It was not only small, but the walls were paper thin. I was shown into an examining room that had no instruments in it. When Dr. Ach came into the room he was carrying a black bag with his instruments in it.

He asked me what I was there for and I told him I wanted to lose about 100 pounds. I told him I had never been thin and that I had been on all kinds of diets.

He smiled at me and said, "okay this will be a simple diet". He reached into the drawer and pulled out a sheet of paper that had on it the foods you could eat on 500 cal per day. He proceeded to tell me that it was a starvation diet. Obviously, he was right! I didn't have much to eat.

Then he told me, that I would fast for a week, but I could have diet drinks, as many as I wanted.

So, I fasted for week drinking a bunch of diet drinks. However, before I went on the diet I had all of my favorite foods. That included three pieces of chocolate icebox pie, at one sitting.

So, for the next 11 months I stayed on 500 cal a day and went to Dr. Ach's office to weigh-in each week. When I went to visit classmates at their apartments for a meal, I brought my own.

And it worked! I don't know why I'm surprised. I guess if you starve your body you lose weight. Part of the diet included going out to his office and weighing in once a week. I did that on Fridays and on the way home I ate three or four doughnuts. And then, I went back on the diet. It was my weekly splurge. I lost about 3 pounds a week.

One of the consequences of my dieting was that at some point Dr. Ach would tell the wife of a member of my class that if Jimmy could lose 3 pounds a week so could they. The following week after my weigh in I would get chewed on by classmates in the lounge because their wives would complain about what the doctor said to them referencing me. I was told that I shouldn't lose so much weight because it meant that their wives would have a finger wagged at them.

Two very exciting things occurred. First, I found suits on the rack to fit me. I was in between sizes and I needed a suit for ordination weekend. The second event was that I went to a blue Jean store that was for thin people. I tried on a pair of 36-inch

pants which was down from 52 inches and they were too big. Then I tried on a pair of 34-inch pants and they were big. I ended up buying 32-inch pants and I was dumbstruck all the way home.

Those were heady days. I went off to Austin as the Hillel director and proceeded to put a good deal of weight back on. So now I sit here 50 years later writing this vignette and I weigh 250 pounds.

At least it's not 310 pounds.

When I arrived in Cincinnati in June, 1967, I probably weighed 240 lbs. and I did not own a suit. I was told that it might be possible for me to get a high holy day's job and I would need a suit. So, I went down to Shilitos Store which was the equivalent of Foley's in Houston. Later they would buy out Foley's. There was no suit in stock that would fit me. I was crushed. As I was walking back to where I parked, I walked past a tailor shop called, "Mike Trotta Tailors". It didn't look like much, so I thought it would be reasonable and I went in.

Of the sales folk in the shop, one came up to me and asked what I needed. I told him I was a new Rabbinic student and I needed to buy a suit for the holy days. He told me he was Mike Trotta and he'd be happy to help. So, he measured me and then asked about how much did I want to spend. I told him I had a job teaching Sunday School and I wasn't rich but I thought I might be able to buy a less expensive suit. He smiled and came back a very nice fabric. He quoted me a price of \$350 that was what I had in my checking account and so I ordered the suit. When I

picked it up, I notice the order form showed a 50% discount. I didn't say anything, and he didn't either.

Well I didn't get a job so I didn't have to have the suit. Having paid for it, I thought that would be the last time I'd see Mr. Trotta. Four years later in my last year, I got a call from Mike asking if I'd come see him. I went to his shop and he began to explain a problem with which he thought I could help. His married daughter had problems with miscarriages and her OBGYN wanted to put her on the pill. In 1972, that was a big deal in the Roman church. Cincinnati was an archdiocese with a Cardinal at its head and Mike was on his advisory board.

Their parish priest told his daughter if she took contraceptive pills, he would deny her communion. Mike didn't want to lose his daughter from the Church but he didn't want to confront the Cardinal.

I was called because as he told me, "you're going to be a Rabbi in a few months and I just know you can solve this problem."

Wow!! I knew what Judaism had to say, but how to get around the Church rulings was a whole other issue. HUC-JIR in Cincinnati had a PhD program for folk who wanted to study Old Testament or Judaism and it was open to any qualified person.

That year among the students was a Catholic Abbot from upstate NY whose mother was Irish Catholic and deceased, and his father, who came with him, was Jewish. Father Isaac Jacobs and I had become good friends. So off I went to Isaac for help for Mike's kid.

After learning about the problem, he asked me to be patient and he'd see what he could do. A couple of days later, he stopped me in the library and gave me the name and phone number of a priest who would not ask any questions because he knew it was a matter of life issue. So, I called Mike, gave him the info and I presumed that ended it.

A few months later, I got another call from Mike to come to the shop. I walk in and he comes up to me and gives me a bear hug. He tells me he is eternally grateful and that I saved his daughter and his grandchildren for the Church. The daughter met with the priest, the parish was near their home and they began attending Church there where she was able to take communion.

I told him I was happy and was about to leave when he stopped me. He walked over to the rack and took off a beautiful suede sport coat. In 1972 that was the most popular men's coat and one of the most expensive - \$700 to \$1000; something I would never afford on a Hillel Director's salary. He put it on me; it fit like a dream, and then he told it was my ordination gift for all I had done for his family. We hugged, and I stayed for a while to visit. It was my prized possession till it wore out years later.

And then there was the time Mark Shook and I gave Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, the founder of HUC-JIR in 1875, a Senior Life Saving certificate from the American Red Cross.

The College-Institute was a natural source of counselors for Jewish summer camps. Student rabbis could teach all kinds of Jewish "stuff" but generally they were limited to just that;

Jewish stuff.

For some reason I don't recall, it struck me that if my school mates had other credentials, they could earn more money. In my day, the campus in Cincinnati had an indoor swimming pool as well as a gym.

Now in my college years when I worked at Echo Hill Ranch, a summer camp in Kerrville, Texas, owned by Kinky Friedman's parents, I had obtained a Water Safety Instructor's credential from the American Red Cross. I taught several swimming courses in those summers, as well as Judo and published the weekly camp newspaper.

So putting these two facts together, I set out to determine if I could offer a Senior Life Saving certificate course in the HUC-JIR pool. The local Red Cross office was fine with the idea, and the Dean of our school was OK with the idea. However, I didn't want to do this alone.

It dawned on me that one of my classmates, Mark Shook, used to swim regularly at the gym. Upon my inquiring, I learned that Mark also had a WSI from the Red Cross and he agreed to co-teach the course.

So, we put up notices around the school particularly emphasizing the possibility for more money. Nine guys signed up for the course almost immediately.

Unfortunately, the problem was that the Red Cross would only authorize a course if ten folk were in it. Mark and I could not

find a minyan; no tenth was found.

So, a unique event occurred that semester at HUC. Perhaps the first American Red Cross's Senior Life Saving course was taught on that campus, and a certain I M Wise finished the course and received his patch and card. Ten finished and the class was certified. I'm sure at least nine received better summer camp pay that year and the founder of the College gained an additional credential.

Hillel Director's Recollections

I came to Hillel at the Austin campus of the University of Texas in June of 1972, right after Ordination. I remember driving to Texas from Cincinnati, scared to death. I had no idea what I was doing. In addition to my letter of appointment signed by Alfred Jospe, I had a letter from Lee Wunsch, then president of the Jewish Defense League, asking me what I was going to do about the lack of Jewish activities on campus. I had no idea that his roommate, David Rosen, published the Texas Jewish Voice, the campus Jewish newspaper. Had I known that fact, I'd have been even more worried. What would they say about this new Hillel Director who had been a frat rat (Tau Delta Phi) at UT in the 60's.

As I was driving through Dallas, it seemed that every channel was some evangelical station. The one that caught my attention was the guy who suggested I make a donation and receive his prayer cloth, and that I should place it on my car radio. Then, if I just put BOTH hands on the cloth, God would bless me. He never suggested the car be stopped ... so I just wondered if he was testing the Almighty.

Even before I moved to Austin, I began taking the Daily Texan, the student newspaper. A major article appeared explaining that the UT president would have open heart surgery in the upcoming week. In an attempt to be pastoral and a bit light hearted, I sent him a note wishing him well and expressing hope that he wouldn't mind a prayer from a Rabbi. He responded promptly thanking me for the wishes and assuring

me that any one undergoing heart surgery would welcome any prayers for healing no matter from whom.

I had taken the job in January as the Hillel Director at UT Austin. After all, I had been the president of the student board when Mickey Sills was Hillel Director. I also figured that if I failed, I was sure to have some friend whose daddy had a business in which I could work. Besides I wasn't much older than the students and at least I could go to UT football games.

After I took the job, but before I was ordained, I came to Austin for a few days visit. I stayed with a UT senior at the time who was applying to HUC-JIR, and had been admitted. He put me up in his apartment. The first day, the Hillel secretary, a friend from college days, made 20 appointments for me that day, most of whom were mixed marriages and all of whom I turned down. She also showed me the unpaid bills and no money in the bank. A great way to begin my rabbinate.

Among my first experiences as Hillel director all in that same day included: finding a filing draw filled with unpaid bills; a notice from the power company that the electricity was to be turned off in a week; and a seven page long, continuous budget report form for B'nai B'rith Hillel national which was due in two weeks. And, an old crank adding machine that never came up with the same total when the same numbers were entered.

I remembered tackling the electricity first and then the budget. I went to the Coop and bought an adding machine out of my own pocket as we didn't have any money in the bank.

For the first month, no students came to any programs.

In February, 1974, we formed a Hillel Streakers Organization headed by Red Goldstein. Why? Cause it was fun to think about. And, some several students had already streaked across campus. I never knew if our kids were of those who darted across campus. Clearly I didn't.

Every month I was doing something with a B'nai B'rith group to try and get money, but not much was raised. I even flew to Midland-Odessa to install a BB lodge's new officers. I paid the plane ticket and they gave me \$200 which netted Hillel \$25. My early source of real money was Milton and Helen Smith. Then in my second year, I conned Tom Friedman, PhD (Kinky's father) to chair the Board and he was willing to sign on a note along with Milton Smith to get us some working funds for programs. My level of frustration was beyond measure. I couldn't get funds from any federation or from BB lodges or from rich Jews in Texas ... Hillel wasn't a priority. So I began traveling the State about 50% of my time trying to solicit money from anyone who would listen.

Finally Jack Kravitz, the federation director in Dallas, met with me and began to see that Austin needed funds. He, in turn, got in touch with Al Goldstein at the Houston Federation and subsequently his successor, Hans Mayer. These guys began to open the coffers and Austin began to receive funds.

In 1975, Oscar Groner, the assistant national Hillel director came to Texas. He and I traveled around the State, and Oscar sold Hillel to the local federations. For their money, they could

be on the local Boards; no more B'nai B'rith, just federation folk. It happened after I left and benefited my successor, Rabbi Neil Borovitz.

In 1972, the budget was \$29,500 per year and my salary was \$9,500. When I left, I was making \$14,000 a year and the budget was \$64,000. Can you imagine the incredible increase this was and the things we could do. For the sake of comparison, my classmates started as assistants at \$19,000 when we were ordained in 1972. We also had no copier.

I was obviously disturbed by the lack of funds and so were many of the kids. About that same time, 72-73, Marvin Zindler of Houston came on the scene. He worked in his father's clothing store (Zindler's) when I met him; he sold my parents my bar mitzvah suit. Later he became a deputy sheriff and made a name for himself dealing with local issues such as "slime in the ice machine" in restaurants. At some point he took on the "Chicken Ranch", a house of prostitution in La Grange that had been illegally open since the Civil War. To the chagrin of many, he managed to close it down in 1973. It was the talk of the State – a lot of folk were very unhappy. Anyhow, it came up at a student board meeting. At that point I told the kids the history of Jakob Frank. Around the 1720's he was a self-proclaimed (false) messiah in the Ukraine. He was an antinomian who established Frankist Houses where any one could join and commit any form of transgressions, short of murder. He based this on the phrase in Psalms 71:20 that says God will lift us up from the depths. So you have to be in the depths for God to find you. So I suggested that if we turned Hillel into a Jakob Frank house, we could replace the Chicken Ranch and UT

students would not have to drive to LaGrange, AND we could call it a religious institution, AND make a lot of money. They all laughed and we moved on.

One night while sitting at a Saturday night football game in Memorial stadium, I did *havdalah* in the stands. In as much as I always wondered if anyone ever read my program reports, I reported attendance figures to national Hillel in Washington, indicating that some 68,000 odd folk attended my *havdalah* service that evening. I sent that in to National Hillel, but no one ever said a word about it. At the Winter meeting of the directors at Grossingers, Barton Lee gave me the Grand Hillel Bullshitters Award for the biggest tale passed on to National.

Even without money, but with help from some families, with the exception of Eli Weisel, every major writer on the Holocaust in the early 70's came to Austin Texas to speak at UT, all through the efforts of Hillel.

There was the time that a girl came in to tell me that she had a problem with her boyfriend. He wanted to go farther than she did. So here I was telling her how to ask him to take responsibility for his actions and to back off while I was single looking for a girl who might want to go as far as I might want.

Then there was the girl who came in so upset because she had lost her laundry and I was trying to keep a straight face at her situation.

Larry Gretskey, PhD zl. in German and teacher of Yiddish was the Hillel Faculty Advisor. He and I set up a film festival for the

students. Just in case no one came to the movies, he and I picked those movies we liked so at least we would see them. Those were the days before Beta or VHS; they were reel to reel movies.

I once think I traded an “A” in Bible for a pool table. The son of an owner of a pool table supply company was taking my Bible course. He didn’t come very often; he was a good frat guy. So I told him that I just knew that if we had a pool table, which his dad could write off as a contribution to Hillel, that his grade would improve. So, a week later, his father called to tell me that he intended on giving a pool table to Hillel and what size did I want.

My days as the Hillel Director began on an auspicious note: Israel’s Yom Kippur war. Not only was there a bomb threat against the building, but a threat against my life. Being more scared than I can tell you, I thought *sachel* to be the solution. So I found out who the Arab student advisor was; met him a truck stop on the outskirts of Austin; arranged with him to try and calm things down; and not only subsequently became a friend but I took three courses from him on Islam. It taught me a wonderful lesson in PR. His name was Najam Bizergan.

In response to what was going on during the war, my friend Alan Aronstein had a DPS officer deliver a .45 pistol to me along with ammunition. I was amazed at the event, but very grateful for the weapon. I never carried it, but I did keep it in the drawer of my office.

Austin was also the scene of my becoming president of the

campus ministers. It all occurred because the US Supreme Court declared Christmas to be a secular holiday for purposes of folk being paid for the holiday. I wrote an article entitled the “Bastardization of Christianity” for the Daily Texan, the student newspaper, condemning the action – how dare they take the first or second most sacred day on the Christian calendar and secularize it. It not only gained me some friends, it got me elected.

Then, of course, there was the time the University of Texas proposed to offer a concentration in Religion, however they decided not to include Christianity. I was the choice of a group of campus clergy to approach the University for a change in thinking.

The University got their shots in at me when Madeline Murray O’Hare announced on the Tonight Show that she was going to open an “atheist Bible” center on the UT campus. The then president of the University asked me to approach Mrs. O’Hare to find out if she was serious about her announcement.

Fortunately, she disappeared before it came to anything ... though not any of my doing.

I suspect I should own up to one of my better blunders. One of my friends on campus was the Episcopal priest. Chris Hines told me his father was also an Episcopal priest and he would be coming to campus in May. Since I had been duly elected president of the campus ministers, I asked him to invite his father to speak to the group’s lunch meeting.

On the appointed day, as I rounded the corner a bit late for the

meeting and dressed as I normally did in kaki's and a Sear's work shirt, I noticed something terribly wrong. Where I expected to find similar apparel, I saw folk in collars, some of whom I didn't think owned collared shirts, let alone collars. Now how was I to know that yes, John Hines, was an Episcopal priest, as a matter of fact a bishop in the Church, as a matter of fact, the head of the Anglican Church in North America – the head priest. Fortunately, he had a sense of humor and we both survived to remain friends.

I suspect, however, that my greatest fame at UT Austin came from the courses I taught in Bible. You could only take 9 hours, I didn't get paid and Hillel got no money. However students did pay registration and even building use fee. When I realized how “insignificant” these courses were, I turned them into easy A classes. The enrollment went from about twenty in each course ... I taught 2 each semester ... to 100 in each class, the maximum the University allowed.

Daryl Royal learned about me. For those of you for whom the name means nothing, he was one of the legendary athletic directors and football coaches at UT. At any rate, my class became a major athletic site for two years; and, my season football tickets improved from the 0 yard line to the 45 yard line, under the new cover.

Then there was the opportunity to give the invocation for the UT graduation in May of 1975. A student was receiving her PhD and her parents were Holocaust survivors. So, she wanted me to give the invocation. I called the school to see if I could do the invocation, but they told me that they had already given out

the job to a Presbyterian minister. They said they chose that faith because the guest speaker was McGeorge Bundy, a past National Security Advisor to President Johnson and one who was blamed for much of Viet Nam and he was a Prebyterian.

I called and told the student the bad news. About a week later, the UT president's office called to say that the minister scheduled had died suddenly, and did I want to do the blessing. I agreed and then wondered why did he die so quickly. With that new assignment I wondered what I'd wear. I had the black academic robe, but one is supposed to wear the hood of your highest degree, and mine at the time was a Master's from the Hebrew Union College. However, I was a University of Texas graduate in the days when it was the only University of Texas. If I didn't have orange and white on some where, how would people know I was a UT grad. So I prevailed on a student, Barbara Ozon (White) who knitted me an orange and white *kepah* and I wore it. When Lady Bird Johnson, who was a regent in those days, saw it, she came over to me and said, "Rabbi, the President and I have been at many Jewish events, but I have never seen a head covering in orange and white." I explained to her that I was a UT grad and this was my way of showing it. She was so overcome that she dragged me over to Alan Shivers, a past Governor of Texas, and kiddingly challenged him, "Alan, you just ask him why he's wearing that orange and white head covering."

On the San Antonio street side of Hillel was the main entrance and there were raised flower beds on each side. There was nothing growing in them other than weeds. One day, a student volunteered to replant the beds and to make it look Texan. I

told him that we didn't have any money and he said not to worry ... he would use wild stuff so that it didn't need much care. After about two weeks, we had the most beautiful beds that added significantly to the front of the building. The most outstanding aspect were two beautiful, large cactuses one on each side. The student told me not to worry, there was no cost and his labor was a donation. All was fine until the next day I read in the Daily Texan that two nights before, several large cactuses were taken from the Governor's mansion. I never asked and I've never told ... till now.

Some things you learn in seminary but never think are going to make it into your experiences. The men and women's bathroom didn't have any toilet paper holders. Seemed to strange to me, but they didn't. Without any thought, I opted for the least expensive toilet roll holders and assembled the tools to mount them. I casually mentioned my intention to one or two students but instead of getting thanks, I was challenged with the accusation that I was violating the *halacha* by my actions. When I wondered at that charge, one of the students pointed out to me that for the weekdays, it didn't matter. However, on Shabbat, such rolls would require tearing and that would violate one of the work prohibitions. Candidly I didn't think anyone would care. Obviously I was wrong. The next week we installed the individual sheet form dispensers.

Among some of the kids who attended Hillel were students involved with the Lubavitch movement new to Texas. The students told me that they didn't have any prayer books for Shabbat. I schnored some money and bought them Chabad siddurim. Again, without thinking, I stamped Hillel's name on

the top spine of the books in case they were taken from the building. We didn't have much money and so buying those books was a major expense. Two days later, I was told that they could not use the books. I thought it was because I was a Reform Rabbi and had bought the books. I presumed that I had contaminated them in some form. Much to my embarrassment, one of the students pointed out to me that when you opened and closed the books, words were made as I had stamped them in the wrong place. After a serious consideration, the words were blacked out and the books were put in use.

Hillel was built in the 1950's and the air conditioning unit was the water chilled/heated type. By the time I arrived, it was so old that only one company in town would work on the machine. To keep it operating, there was an open-faced electric bathroom heater next to the oil pan to keep the oil viscous. When there was a new employee, they were brought over to see our ancient system. I never asked about the risk of the open face heater 'cause without it we would have no a.c.

The first Chanukah I thought there would be no students. After all, it was in December and finals were coming. So, I guessed we'd have less than 50 students. I bought about 30 pounds of potatoes and began peeling and grating them with Lillie Kelley our cook.

That evening, the students began arriving, and arriving, and arriving, and arriving. I went twice more to the grocery store to buy potatoes. 200 students later, my knuckles were bleeding and Lillie and I were exhausted. But, it was a successful program. When I went to Houston to visit my mother and she

asked about my cuts. After my explanation and her laughter, she showed me several boxes of instant latkes.

I arrived at the building one day to find a tall young man waiting to see the Rabbi. He informed me that his group was planning on establishing a commune outside the Austin city limits. As a part of their arrangements, they wanted to construct an *eruv* around the facility and they wanted my help to set it up.

Candidly, I knew about an *eruv*, but had no idea on how to establish one. However, since I was the new Rabbi, I knew I had to have an answer particularly since I knew this student's parents. Sounding wise, I asked him to return the next afternoon and I would have all the info he needed on paper.

I spent that night with a pot of coffee, several things to nosh and umpteen Rabbinic texts spread all over the living room of my small apartment looking for all the laws on *eruvim*. By sunrise I was satisfied I had found enough material to sound and look erudite. That afternoon I gave the young man the needed info. I never learned if they established the commune or if they ever used the info on an *eruv*, but now I was an expert.

Then there was a fraternity pledge who decided to go to services his first Friday in Austin. When he came back to the frat house he was paddled by his pledge master who told him that even though they were a Jewish house, going to services was too much. I don't remember seeing him again but I sure understood his experience.

A parents club gave another Jewish fraternity money to join Hillel. One of their contrite members told me instead they took the funds and used them to have a beer party.

I remember as Thanksgiving vacation was to start the next day, not many students were in the Hillel building and I was thinking of closing. Suddenly a female student appeared who told me that she had nothing to live for and she was going to jump off the UT tower. Unfortunately a month before a student had taken their own life at Rice University by jumping off their tower.

Among the topics covered in counseling courses was not suicide. Intriguingly I had approached the counseling office for just such a program several months before, but no response had arrived. So grasping at straws I told the student the following: if she committed suicide I would blame myself and go crazy. As a result, I would lose my job and be committed to a mental institution for the rest of my life.

She looked at me as if I were the crazy one. Regardless, it did get her attention and distracted her and she agreed to go with me to the student counseling center. I found myself turning her over to one of the PhD counseling candidates. It turned out that I had been his counselor at Echo Hill summer camp. He assured me they could handle the situation.

One afternoon a sign was erected caddy-corner from Hillel announcing the new Mormon Student Center would be built on that site. I had studied a good deal about Christianity but nothing about the Church of the Latter Day Saints of Jesus

Christ.

A few days later, a young man in a coat and tie arrived to see the Rabbi. He introduced himself as the new director of the Mormon Center. We visited a bit and then asked me if I would mind helping him with an issue. He wanted to discuss the 12 tribes of Israel. In my “know it all” way I said that we Jews didn’t pay much attention to them anymore.

He left that topic and suggested I might want to read about the Mormon Church and he gave me a book on the Church. We parted, and I went to my apartment. On the way I picked up a pizza and Coke and headed home to read the book. After getting comfortable and biting into one slice of the pizza, I found myself choking either on the pizza or on my words, as I read how significant the 12 tribes of Israel were to the Mormon tradition.

We remained friends but when his wife suffered a miscarriage, I learned about divisions within the Christian church. I sent flowers to his wife wishing her a swift recovery, but when I suggested that to the campus ministers group, I learned that they considered the Mormons to be pagans and not Christians. Over the years I have learned that was a shared viewpoint in many communities.

When I arrived in Austin in 1972, I was hoping to take advantage of various discounts given to clergy, particularly those given by TTA. Trans Texas Airways (TTA) was the forerunner of Southwest Airlines and they offered a 50% discount to clergy. So I put on a coat and tie, brought a photo

of my ordination diploma and headed out to the Austin Airport. The lady behind the TTA counter was very nice but smiled as she told me that the discounts had been discontinued two months before.

While I'm on that topic, I also had a major football disappointment. For years the Southwest Football Conference games began with a prayer offered by a local pastor or rabbi. I thought that would be great; sit in the press box, give a prayer and watch the game from that wonderful location. During my first month, I moseyed over to the athletic office with the intention of putting my name on a list of possible "pray-ers". To my disappointment, I was told that games no longer began with prayers. Oh well, another disappointment.

I began telling stories at services instead of preaching sermons. I didn't like writing 3 part sermons and I didn't think the students wanted to hear them. My favorite ones were Chelm stories and I became well known for them. As a matter of fact, some students got together to create a Jewish co-op where students would live and eat and maintain some Jewish traditions. And, they chose the name B'nei Chelm in my honor.

During the Korean War, the Hillel building was the location of the USO and served both soldiers off duty and also college students. By 1972 when I arrived, the only remnant of the USO was the Hillel Library. Most of the books were just general literature having nothing to do with Judaism. I really didn't know what to do as the Foundation was essentially broke.

To our rescue came a well-known attorney from Houston

whose kids went to summer camp with me. Billy Goldberg was a very honored active member of the Texas Jewish community and a prominent Houston attorney. He was visiting Austin one weekend and I had a chance to cry on his shoulder about the library. What I didn't know was that he was very involved with the Houston Public Library and more over he knew of some trust funds that he might be able to tap for our library. Not only did he apply for us, but he obtained \$5,000 which allowed the entire library to be replaced with primarily Jewish texts.

One of the greatest blessings for Hillel during my tenure was our faculty advisor, Dr. Laurence A Gretskey zl. Larry taught Yiddish and German at UT. Though he was not a native speaker, his German was so good that his doctoral dissertation, which he wrote in German, was published in Germany by a major publisher. Leib was always ready to support any program and was at everything.

In as much as we were both bachelors at the time, we bummed around together. I guess the funniest event was that we went to see Blazing Saddles when it debuted. As you may remember, there was a scene where the American Indians spoke, and it was Yiddish they were speaking. He and I laughed so hard, we both fell out of our seats. Later that evening, my cousin called to say that a couple of her friends were in the theatre and were wondering if we were there because they saw these two guys roaring with laughter at the Yiddish.

Not everything was silly and fun. I was called upon to conduct a couple of memorial services at dorms and fraternity/sorority houses. One youngster was killed in a car accident and two

students overdosed on drugs.

I tried everything I could to get students in the building. It was supposed that there were 1500-2000 Jewish students at UT at that time. I thought that the only way to get to everyone was to use the student newspaper, the Daily Texan. So, I had the paper publish a couple of cartoons with what I thought were cute phrases underneath. Candidly I don't remember the cartoons, but one phrase was "come to Hillel even if your mother told you to" and the other one was "come to Hillel, it's not a Jewish mother's conspiracy."

Some couple of months into the first semester of my first year, my mother called. She seemed a bit disturbed when she asked when I was going to tell her about the ads that maligned her along with all the other Jewish mothers. Then she broke into laughter and wanted to know if I was getting a good response.

On the other hand, during my first semester I was invited to Dallas to speak to a seven-state meeting of B'nai B'rith Women. I drove to Dallas and when the time came for me to speak, there were about 400 Jewish ladies present. During that presentation, I noted that not every Jewish kid belonged in college and I had met several kids who hated school. Everyone applauded, and I headed home. In those days a round trip to Dallas was no big deal for me.

I hadn't gotten home well that night when the phone rang. It was my mother. She began by saying that she couldn't believe what she had been told by her friends. Had I really told a room full of Jewish mothers that their children didn't belong in

college. Was I crazy?! After all, it was their natural borne right to go to college and how dare I, a rabbi, say anything different. After she calmed down, I explained that certainly it was any kids right, but it didn't mean every kid should go. I still believe that today.

Thanks to the creative thinking of George Kozmetsky, Dean of the Business School, and the generosity of Edwin Gale, a chair of Jewish Studies was created at UT. As UT looked for someone to occupy that chair, I was asked to serve on that committee. During my tenure, there were two candidates with whom I spent some fun time.

Jakob J. Petuchowski, my professor of liturgy and theology, at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion applied for the job. I later learned that he applied as a way of coercing some concessions from the president of HUC-JIR. Aside from two very enjoyable meals reminiscing about my days in school, there was the interview with the committee where the UT Dean of Humanities wanted to impress Dr. Petuchowski. He suggested that there were about 3000 volumes of Judaica that he was sure the professor would find useful. As Rabbi Petuchowski allowed his pipe smoke to curl around his beard and up over his sort of squared haircut, he told the Dean that he was sure his 5000 volume personal library would meet all his needs. He didn't take the job.

The other was Zalman Schechter, probably the most well-known kabbalist (Jewish mystic) in the 20th century. He arrived in Austin and wanted to stay somewhere he could keep kosher. At that time, I was observing kashrut and so he stayed with me.

It was no problem as I had a two-bedroom apartment. He even taught me how to make soft boiled eggs to order. One of the three evenings he stayed, he gave me a ring made out of thin metal that had the phrase in Hebrew, “gam zeh yaavor”, “this too shall pass”. He told me to keep it or wear it as long as I was single. When I got married I was t pass it on to a single friend. That’s exactly what I did after I married Shelley Nussenblatt Kessler.

Zalman also brought along “grass” of some sort. We took it to Billy and Linda (Gold) Kadish’s house where we went for dinner. Gold was the Hillel Secretary and her husband was a fraternity brother of mine and the 3 of us went to UT together. Zalman got me so stoned, that driving home, I almost waved at two cops next to us. The next day I taught a Bible course at Hillel and I was stoned the entire time. Zalman appeared for his guest lecture in Kelley green pants, a lumberman’s red checkered shirt, a very wide tie and a large black beret.

Obviously, the UT faculty couldn’t handle him and he was not offered the job. I, on the other hand, really enjoyed his visit.

My first month as the Hillel Director (June, 1972) no one came to anything. Only the secretary (Linda Gold Kadish), Lily Kelly (cook), Jim Lee (cleaning man) and I were in the building. By the end of the first year, about 100 kids came to services each Friday night and to regular weekly programs. Since no one came on Saturday morning, I gave up on having services then. Seders drew about 200 kids though there were other seders on campus and in dorms.

The first-year budget of Hillel was \$29,500. My salary was

\$9500 of it, Hillel provided \$10,000 and I had to raise the balance. When I left in three years, the budget was ~\$70,000 and there was ~\$30,000 in a savings account that only the Director knew about and had access to; I raised it so I could plan programs.

I left Hillel work because I got burned out raising money. One of the worst times was when I went to Dallas to solicit money from B'nai B'rith. I appeared at a meeting at which during my presentation a wealthy member of the community sat listening on his small transistor radio to a baseball game. About ½ way through, he removed his one ear piece and asked why I had to spend money on office supplies; couldn't I just schmore them. Before I could answer he put the ear piece back in his ear and continued listening to the game and not my response.

The lady who cooked and did some cleaning was Lilly Kelley. She was an elderly African American who owned a small home in East Austin. At least I presumed she owned it until one day she came into my office crying. She told me that the guy from whom she was buying the house had sent her a certified letter telling her that she was behind in her "rent" and he was going to evict her. I didn't know who to call, but I knew she needed a lawyer. I called on Irwin Salmonson, a member of the Jewish community, who seemed to me to be a "tough" attorney and that's what I thought she needed. I told him I'd pay his fees, but we had to save her house. There existed in Texas in those days a form of purchase contract that said if you were late or missed one payment, the mortgage changed into a lease and all that was paid in for purchase became rent. I never knew how Irwin worked it out, but I raised a few thousand dollars (2 or 3)

and the owner transferred the title to the house to Lillie. One of the better things I did in Austin.

In my effort to find money I contacted anyone I could. One of those folk was a delightful member of the Jewish community who I learned about in Rabbinical school. His name was Will Nathan and he was an attorney. I visited with him in my first year and in my third year he contacted me to report that his relative died in New York city and had left us a percentage of a “slum housing building” they owned. That came to \$9000 and it was like I had just been given a million dollars for programs. He was one of my heroes.

When I was in my last year at HUC-JIR, my classmate Larry Lauer, who later did aliyah and changed his name to Levi Lauer and ran PaRDeS, took as his first job the Hillel post at the University of Missouri in Columbia where his predecessor left a Rabbi’s discretionary fund of some \$30,000. That was a lot in 1972. I did not find such a fund in Austin, rather I found a file drawer with its bottom filled with unpaid bills. However, when I left 3 years later, I had created a \$30,000 fund for my successor and all bills paid. It, too, wasn’t bad for those days.

When I arrived in Austin, there was a wonderful student publication called the “Jewish Voice” created and published by David Rosen. David would later go to HUC-JIR in Cincinnati, but after ordination he served Conservative congregations and now is the retired senior Rabbi of Congregation Beth Yeshuren in Houston, the largest Conservative congregation in the US. He was assisted by Lee Wunsch, head of the JDL, and now is the retired Director of the Jewish Federation of Houston. These

two guys put out a wonderful, multipage paper with pictures of Jewish life on campus. Most particularly they took on issues such as the Yom Kippur War, Jews for Jesus and Jewish co-ops. After a period of time, they took on support of Hillel activities and were very helpful in assisting me in growing involvement at the Foundation.

Why do Holocaust survivors come to synagogue? I never really thought much about it until I organized a major seminar program at UT on the shoah.

I found enough money to bring many of the authors on the Holocaust to campus as speakers (Weisel had to wait for Rabbi Bororvitz's ability). In addition, I started the program with a series of movies at the Hillel building.

Among the folk who arrived for the first film was a member of the Jewish community about whom besides his name, I only knew spoke with an accent. As the room filled John stood in the back of the room. I slowly made my way back to him and reached out to shake his hand.

As he took my hand and squeezed, he told me that this was the first time he had been in a synagogue since childhood and WWII. He informed me that he was a Holocaust survivor of Auschwitz and never felt comfortable coming in before. Though he joined a shul in town, he never went – he only sent his kids.

When I asked why he came this time, he told me that I made him feel safe and he thought it was time. From then on, I saw

him frequently at the foundation and I understand he began attending his synagogue.

Amazing how events happened. I never asked past his explanation.

Then there was the guy who showed up at Hillel who told me he had opened an India bakery. And, he wanted my Rabbinic endorsement that the food was kosher. After stifling a laugh, I explained that my *heksher* would not be recognized by anyone. He left, disappointed.

After being in Austin for a year or so, I got a call one night from a person who said they got my name from national Hillel and he was part of a group that snuck prohibited religious items like tallit, t'fillin, siddurim, kepot, etc. into Russia. In 1973 that was a no-no in the Soviet Union but he told me not to worry. It was all arranged that I was going as a tractor company rep along with other farm equipment folk to see what might be sold in Russia. So, all I had to do was sneak away from the group, deliver the "stuff" and rejoin the other folk. When I said I knew nothing about farming, again he told me not to worry, they would send me materials that would teach me and I only had to accentuate my Texas accent. I told him I was honored to be considered but I could never keep a straight face; besides, I was a chicken at heart.

On May 30, 2016 I looked up the Rabbi who was in charge of personnel when I went to work for Hillel. Rabbi Max Ticktin was a JTS graduate who had been the Hillel Director at Northwestern. He conducted the intro program for new Hillel

directors in 1971. We all gathered in DC and among the practices he suggested was not to keep any notes on counseling. The worst that could happen was that you had to ask the student to remind you of the issues. He came to that conclusion because before Roe vs. Wade and abortion was illegal, he provided the name of a physician who did the procedure to a student seeking help. Unfortunately, that student was an undercover cop and he was arrested. AND all the documents in his office were confiscated. So, he warned us against leaving paper trails. So, for 50 years I have made no counseling notes.

In contacting Max, he reminded me of something I had done but had forgotten. His email reads, “For a strange reason your name was actively used for a good 15 years or so beginning with your departure from Austin Hillel. You had fulfilled a mitzvah of showing respect for a scroll of the Bible. You were disturbed when you found a crumpled large scroll thrown into a closet at the Hillel House. You wisely decided to send it to me and when I saw that it could not really be repaired, with the advice of others, I had the scroll respectfully buried. It had been called the Kessler Sefer Torah by a number of students and faculty that knew about the problem and how we resolved it.” Not bad for a Reform Rabbi.

While I was the Hillel Director, the social fraternity (Tau Delta Phi) of which I was a member in my college days closed; it was bought out nationally. So, I was asked by the then president to come and say kaddish for the chapter. I did.

I remember that Chabad came to UT when I arrived. Rabbi Shimon Lazeroff drove up on a regular basis to hold services

and to teach. He wanted to know about the classes I taught and wanted to see if he could teach also. I asked him to do a guest class. He came and after a few remarks, one of the more vocal ladies who attended Hillel asked him if it was true that the Talmud says if you masturbate, you'll grow hair on your hands. He was so flabbergasted that he said he wouldn't answer her in mixed company for which he was booed. He never taught a credit course.

Thankfully Milton and Helen Smith donated funds to refurbish the building. It included painting, new a.c./heating, ceilings repaired and other items in desperate need of repair. Their financial support was a part of Austin Hillel from when it opened until their passing.

As I've mentioned elsewhere, I was burnt out and I went off to Optometry school which lasted a few days. Trying to handle the Hillel budget, raise the funds to operate the ministry and serve as the Rabbi at the same time overwhelmed me. With a few exceptions, until the Jewish federations in Texas began to give money to support Hillel, B'nai B'rith did little and the ability to market Jewish life to college students was next to nothing. As a result, I resigned Hillel in the Spring of 1975 and began a new life.

Alexandria, LA Recollections

A complaint on my dress

Now after my Rabbinic adventures as the Hillel Director in Austin, two days of Optometry school in Houston, a year of teaching in Houston, five years at B'nai Israel in Galveston and six years in Austin selling insurance, I arrived in the summer of 1988 with a wife and two young kids to become the Rabbi in Alexandria, LA. We rented a condo, settled in for an undetermined stay. As a part of moving in, we discovered a cafeteria where we could eat and not worry about dress or price.

One Sunday that summer we took the kids to that cafeteria after having been outside. Alexandria, LA is clearly hot in the summer and that day was no exception. So, we all arrived in short pants and pull over shirts; nice but yet shorts.

The next day I received a phone call from the president of the congregation telling me that it was inappropriate for the Rabbi to be seen in public in shorts, no matter how nice they were. There were community standards for clergy in Alexandria, Louisiana and I breached that rule.

Later in our stay, two past presidents who owned an outstanding men's clothing store provided me with appropriate clothes. More of that story later.

The Last Temptation of Christ movie

About a week into arriving, I was called to attend a meeting of the Alexandria Ministers Association.

The Rabbi Emeritus, Marty Hinchon, was still in town and he called to give me a ride to the meeting. As we traveled to the gathering, he informed me that the largest group in the city were the Pentecostals and Pastor Mangum was the senior minister and president of the ministerial group.

There were about 25 ministers present and the Pastor got right to the issue saying that a movie, “The Last Temptation of Christ”, was coming to the local theatres and he had 200 folk ready to boycott the film. He wanted the ministers to join in. Aside from thinking Martin Scorsese’s movie was not factual, he also thought it would be harmful to the young US airmen stationed at Fort Polk who would come see the movie; after all, Jesus married Mary Magdalene and had children.

As I sat and listened, I remembered Dr. Sandmel’s courses on Christianity at HUC and wonder what he might have said. For me, his student, it seemed much ado about nothing.

So, with the background provided by the chair, the group seemed ready to vote to boycott and picket. It just seemed silly to me, so I raised my hand to comment.

I suggested that I didn’t think the movie could do any harm and that Christianity had been on the boards for 2000 years and a movie not yet dry from the cutting room floor could not do

much damage. I also suggested we should have much more faith in the message of the church.

The result of my comments was that I got a standing ovation and the next day, one of the headlines read “Rabbi has Faith in Christianity.” The movie was not picketed, but I was very well known from then on and I think the stock of the Jewish community in Alex went up a bit.

My Dress

How did I know that the dress of clergy was significant? Well it was.

Just a little background. Rabbi Martin Hinchin, a delightful person, was my predecessor who had served 35 years in Alexandria. He bought all his clothes from the Caplan’s Men’s Stores which carried as fine a garment as a New York Fifth Avenue shop. In addition, Marty was a classmate of A. Stanley Dreyfus, a previous Galveston Rabbi who was Director of Placement for the CCAR at the time of this story. What I didn’t know was that yearly, Stanley came to visit Marty and to replenish his clothes closet at Caplans for those outworn items. And, he was only charged cost.

Now to me; one day at a Rotary meeting in downtown Alex, David Caplan asked me to come to the store after the meeting. When I arrived, Shelley was there, and clothing was laid out for examination.

I was told that the brothers were going to make a gift to me of some clothes that they thought were better suited for the Rabbi. I never spent \$400 or \$500 on a suit, or \$250 on pants or \$100 for shirts – yet there they lay.

I tried my best to reject the offer without being rude, but it was a done deal before I entered the store: a suite, a sport coat, four pair of pants and 4 or 5 shirts – and the cost, ZERO, it was a gift.

Now this is really going to sound terrible, but all I could think about was that none of these clothes could be washed in the washing machine and drier – everything, but the shirts had to be dry cleaned, and that was not going to be paid by the Temple.

When I left Alex and returned to Galveston, I went back to buying my pre-fit clothes at Kmart and Penney's – all of which were wrinkle proof and could be machine washed.

I'm still friendly with the Caplans and they're wonderful folk. I just don't talk clothing with them.

Eating Alligator

So, I decided to leave my “new career” selling insurance and return to the world of Rabbi-ing full time. Going to Victoria, TX as a part time rabbi on weekends made me realize that I missed the rabbinate.

The problem was to find a job after having had a “checkered”

career as Bernard Rappaport (Chair of the UT Board of Regents and past president of the Waco synagogue) labeled during my interview in Waco. Sam Stahl was most kind when he told me that if I couldn't find a job, I could work for him for a year and apply from Beth El. What a mensch.

Well I got a call from Stanely Dreyfus, the Director of Placement for the CCAR, who told me to apply to Alexandria, LA. There was nothing open in Texas, and besides he wanted me to go there. Why? Because his classmate, Martin Hinchin, was retiring and he wanted someone there who would treat Martin well. Bill Scholl, my longtime friend from Crowley, LA told me that people only moved from LA and to it.

None the less, Shelley and I drove to Alex and found them to be just delightful folk. They would pay me \$50k; Eddie was paying me \$28K.

All went along as any interview until we went out to dinner with the officers of the Congregation. We went to a local restaurant on a river or canal or some body of water and among the other things that was ordered, alligator was ordered.

Now to eat or not to eat, that was the question. It wasn't a matter of love, God or country, it was a matter of \$50k or \$28k. So, I ate alligator and I was hired as the Rabbi of the Temple in Alexandria, Louisiana. It was a wonderful stay.

Book of Ruth Calligraphy

Alex had a craft fair while we were there, and folk did crafts to show or give away. In those days I was still doing calligraphy. It dawned on me to check with Temple president about me doing some lettering. He agreed.

So, I made up a piece consisting of a quote from the Book of Ruth and some minimal art work – a Biblical looking harp. I made some pencil outlines that I would fill in at the fair.

It turned out that my art work was amongst the most popular of the evening. It was the talk of the community that the new Rabbi was so involved. Not bad for the guy who didn't know how to dress properly.

Northwestern and Me

I served the Jewish Temple in Alexandria, LA. In the nearby city Nacogdoches there was Northwestern University that is a branch of LSU. LA had no junior colleges.

There is an organization, Chautauqua Society that arranges for lectures to be given in small communities and colleges around the country.

One day I received a phone call asking if I'd be willing to deliver a lecture at Northwestern on the origins of the Bible. They had in mind the JEDP theory. I agreed.

The correspondence with the school was from two professors in the English department who asked that I come early to have dinner and then plan on speaking. After speaking there would be a reception.

Since the kids were young, I drove up alone, about an hour, to meet these guys and to speak. It was surprising to learn that they both had PhD's from Harvard and they were there because the school was set aside for the smartest kids in the state or from out of state.

So off I went to make my presentation. There were about 100 folk there including some townsfolk. I was a few minutes into my normal presentation of the JEDP theory when a woman stood up and said that she was outraged that I was exposing these children to this theory that would cause them to be damned to hell. She then went on to challenge how I could speak about a "non God approved Bible."

To say the least, I was shocked; probably scared and more over I'm sure I was shaking a bit. I remember telling her that this was just a theory and that knowledge was not risky.

Then I told her I wasn't sure what a God approved Bible was since one could easily walk into a bookstore and multiple shelves would be filled with Bibles. Her comment was that obviously the King James edition is the only God approved Bible.

When I asked her about all the other editions, she said they weren't valid. Then when I asked her about the problems of

translation from the original Hebrew or English, she said that there were no problems.

She sat down, and a man stood up to say he was outraged that I was challenging her objections. Candidly I don't remember what I said, but I remember feeling very threatened about being there. About that time, one of the faculty members got up and said the lecture needed to be finished; questions would need to wait.

When they asked me to stay for a question and answer by community folk, I declined, went to the car, locked the doors, turned on the overhead lights and sped home with the radio blaring. I didn't like the idea of driving home on a dark road, alone.

Candidly I was shaken and when I got home I told Shelley this place was way too conservative for me and I wasn't going to stay in this place.

Niggers, Jews and Sigma Nus

While we were living in Alexandria, LA there was a local donut shop that had good donuts. It seems that for a while it attracted an undesirable group of folk, who might be considered right wing racists.

At some point, the donut shop asked those folk not to come back.

So, those folk moved over to the local McDonalds.
In those days, I would take Andy and Jenny to McDonalds for
breakfast now and then. My mazel, it was that same
McDonalds.

The last straw and the last visit was while sitting there and the
kids were eating, I heard one guy say to the group, “you know If
we had fewer Niggers and Jews the town would be better off.”

We never went back to McDonalds and we don’t live in Alex .

ONE HUNDRED FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF GEMILUTH CHASSODIM

October 15, 2009

Dear Friends:

Please permit me to express my congratulations to you all on
the 150th anniversary of the Temple. It is an incredible
achievement and one that is very worthy of recognition.

Most especially I want to commend you for being wonderful
heirs to a very special Jewish presence in CENLA. You have
taken the traditions and commitments handed down to you and
have enriched them in such a manner that has brought much
honor to Gemiluth Chassodim. After all, the Temple IS the folk
who are its members in each generation.

Shelley and I, and our kids, particularly want to thank you for
the privilege I had in serving as your Rabbi. It was a marvelous

experience and I learned a great deal about myself and how wonderful a group of folk can be – even to a Texan.

I wish you many more years of happiness and success. May God's choicest blessings continue to rest upon you and yours.

With warm affection.

Jimmy Kessler

Road to the Island, Twice

I probably spent half my time trying to raise money to keep Hillel going. In addition, I still didn't feel legitimate being a Rabbi; I didn't think I knew enough. So, I thought I'd quit the rabbinate and Hillel. My Uncle Al Aron was an optometrist and owned a TSO office in Houston. He was happy to have me consider that career and so I applied to the University of Houston College of Optometry. I had to take a course in microbiology in order to qualify but I was admitted. I left Austin and moved to a two-room apartment in Houston.

I lasted one week. I didn't like math and I didn't do well in it. When I went to the Dean to withdraw, he told me that I was doing a mitzvah. I asked what he knew about mitzvot. He told me he was a minister and knew about Judaism and of course knew that I was a Rabbi. He also told me that they admitted three more students than they were supposed to have and by my leaving, they only had to fail out two and not three.

So there I was living in Houston, not in school, with only \$6,000 in the bank and not knowing what to do. Fortunately, Roy Walter hired me to teach religious and Hebrew school. I also got a job teaching Hebrew at Bellaire high school as it was an approved language. (1975)

With the help and advice of Roy Walter and Ruth Fred zl. (director of Jewish Family Service) I found Dr. Milton Altschuler, a wonderful psychiatrist. I saw him for most of the year and he helped me get my head on straight. During that

time, I came to realize that I wanted to try a community congregation to see what that was like. Temple B'nai Israel was coming open in Galveston and the Rabbi leaving there (Sam and Lynn Stahl) wanted me to be his successor. With Milton's help I got the courage and temerity to apply. I was hired.

In preparing for my interview I read everything on Rabbi Henry Cohen, particularly the book on Cohen that Rabbi Stanley Dreyfus edited. Cohen was this legend in Texas who served 64 years in Galveston. In it there was a report on Henry Cohen's wedding. The article from the Galveston paper read, "a fatal matrimonial malady befalls every single minister that comes to Temple B'nai Israel." It was true. Every rabbi who was a bachelor, married a Galveston girl in the first year. Rabbi Silverman married a Galveston lady and he became the senior Rabbi of Temple Emanuel in New York, at that time the largest synagogue in the world. Cohen came, and married Molly in his first year and he stayed 64 years.

So, comes my interview with the committee and sometime in the meeting Adrian Levy, Sr. who while Mayor introduced LBJ to FDR, asked me how I was going to be able to live in their "Rabbinage" (a home for the Rabbi) as it was not furnished, and I was single. I told him that I thought what they really wanted to know was why I was still single. I told them I was not gay, or did I hate women nor was I a confirmed bachelor. I then reached into my little folder and handed out a photo copy of the marriage announce of Henry Cohen which I obtained by coming to Galveston the week before and making copies. I told them that my mother would be ecstatic if they hired me as they had a perfect batting record in getting their rabbis married. If

they hired me I stood a good chance of getting married. Sure enough, a little over a year later, I married a Galveston girl and I am now in my 42nd year of marriage and retired after 32 years at CBI. One committee member told me years later that they didn't like overweight men and knew they would vote against me when I walked in. However, after I told the Cohen story and handed out the article, they knew with a sense of humor like that, I just had to be their rabbi.

During that year being out of work was the best thing that ever happened. Bernie and Marcie Kozberg, friends, arranged a blind lunch at their home with them, me and Shelley Gail Nussenblatt. She was from Galveston, had graduated from UT and had fled to Boston where she was working. That was Passover in 1976 and as of yet, I had no job. We began calling each other; I got the job in Galveston; we had a liaison in New Orleans in December of 1976 and we got married on August 20, 1977.

It was an odd mix but a wonderful *shidach*. B'nai Israel had ~200 family units and about 120 kids in the religious school. There was me, a full-time secretary and a *shamas* who also set up and took down for all programs. I did Friday night services at 8 in the sanctuary followed by a receiving line and an oneg in the library. RS was on Sunday and Hebrew class was two afternoons a week. The average age of CBI was 79 and I was 29. I was told that they wanted their rabbi to spend 50% of his time active in the community. I was paid \$18,000.00 a year.

Shelley and I got engaged on March 15, 1977 and married on August 20, 1977.

To set a different tenor for my installation, instead of inviting in some Rabbi to “install” me, I asked the president of the Temple, Irwin M. (Buddy) Herz, Jr., to do so. AND, I asked the Board to purchase the new CCAR prayerbook on observing Shabbat at home for each family in the Congregation. They did it and people talked about it for a while.

When I asked Buddy Herz if he and I would meet weekly or what (having only been a Hillel Director, I didn’t know what pulpit Rabbis did for a living), he responded “after you’ve call the fire department, you call me”. In essence they hired me to run all aspects of the Temple. So it was being a glorified Hillel Director.

Finances were a concern of mine. The Temple did have an endowment fund from which only the earnings could be used. There was about \$400,000.00 in the fund. The idea was created by Neil Nathan when he was president. I don’t think I want to spend time on each effort I made to raise monies, so let it suffice to say I was successful. As I write this in 2020, the various endowment and available funds were worth \$3.26 million when I retired in 2014. All of that money came from me doing the soliciting.

Family dinners were at TBI when I got there, but I changed them. I arranged them so that there was a brief service before the meal, no Torah reading and a story and charged a minimum amount. Now we do them on the second Friday of the month and we get anywhere from 30 to 60 folk. I also moved the Friday service from 8PM to 6 PM in the hope that it would attract UTMB folk.

Let me explain that I served B'nai Israel from 1976 till 1981. Then Shelley and I left and moved to Austin where I sold insurance working for Ed Golden who is married to my cousin Dolly Moskowitz Golden. I worked for him for seven years until 1988. Then I took a pulpit in Alexandria, Louisiana and stayed one year. We then came back to Galveston in 1989 and have been here since then.

Having started as a Hillel Director, the number of attendees was always an item I noticed. For Hillel, I had to send in a report on the number so counting was SOP.

The average attendance in my early days at the Temple was between 25 and 35 folk. Mostly older members and to an 8PM service which I knew wasn't easy for members with kids, even with babysitting.

Well, I knew it had to happen, I just never expected it to really take place. One Friday night not a single person came. It was just me, the non-Jewish choir and Alphonse Hamilton, the maintenance man.

Alphonse was in his late 70's and a Deacon in his Black Baptist Church. He had been with the Temple some 20+ years when I arrived.

As I stood there between anger and tears, Alphonse looked at me and said, "Rabbi, if they were stiff necked for Moses, why would you expect any better!"

Among the events I remember from my first 5 years in

Galveston include the following. I was given the Temple's "Rabbinage" to live in on Woodrow. It was a large, 3BR, 2BA home that needed work. I had little furniture, but enough to look presentable. Over the first year, I invited almost all the members to the house for dinner I cooked – a few at a time.

There was a lady named Agnes who "came with the house" and did the cleaning. I didn't know who paid her and so I didn't do anything at first. Then at the end of the first week, I found out I was to pay her. So, I left Temple about 30 minutes before services, found her house in North Galveston and gave her the cash. It was an amazing way to learn about the halacha that says you aren't to let the *erev shabat* sun set on the wages of your employee.

While in Galveston, I also served as the Jewish Chaplain at the University of Texas Medical Branch. My first middle of the night call was around 2 in the morning to come to John Sealy Hospital as a man was dying. I entered the room and found four people sitting on the floor with "Indian" blankets around their shoulders and chanting. On the other side of the room there was man in the bed with one of those oxygen tents. My first worry was that there was a burning candle in the middle of the folk on the floor and I figured we'd all be blown up.

The family told me they were American Indians and the father made them promise that he would not die before having spoken to a "Jewish Rabbi. So, I prayed with him.

Dr. Bill Levin was president of UTMB when I arrived and a past president of CBI. He had been my Uncle Al Aron's roommate in

college, a friend of my parents and a mentor to my brother.

When I was in my last year at UT Austin in 1967, the students marched on the Tower and the Regents for tearing down huge trees around the stadium to provide room for more seats and parking. Frank Irwin was the chair of the Board of Regents and one afternoon spoke to the gathered students from the balcony of the Regents meeting room in the UT Tower.

He announced that we didn't need all 15000 students and we didn't need all 3000 faculty members. Among the faculty was John Silber, a professor of philosophy and later president of Boston University. Obviously, I was on the students' side.

Now back in Galveston, I met the UTMB chief of police, Maurice Harr, who was also a member of CBI. He told me that he had a special parking spot for me, next to Bill Levin. Not bad for a 31 year old pisher, just come to town.

So one day, I decide to use it. I pull in to a lot that no longer exists, park the car and am getting out. As I walk away I notice another car come next to mine and Bill Levin gets out. As I say hello I notice that the other person getting out of the front of his car is Frank Irwin. Bill calls to me to come over and meet his dear friend, the chair of the Board of Regents.

My mazal!

While in Galveston, I was privileged to serve as the community representative on the Institutional Review Board, the IRB for 30+ years. It reviewed research on campus that involved

humans specifically to be sure the volunteer subjects were properly protected, and the volunteers gave informed consent for all that was done to them.

One of the policies at UTMB relating to research bothered me. In the hallway that crossed east/west through John Sealy Hospital was a large room guarded by one of those doors cut in half where the top was open and the bottom with a small shelf on top was closed; the service “counter”.

This very deep room was the medical records room. Authorized folk went there to obtain medical records of anyone seen at UTMB. It was probably very convenient and oh so simple; show your badge and get the file you want.

And then, a young medical resident proposed a study of the use of penicillin at UTMB over a given period of time. He was interested in the medical issues for which there was the most use of the antibiotic. Sounds pretty innocuous.

I was on the subgroup that was assigned to review the project. I, along with a faculty member, met with the resident. He appeared with a stack of those old computer print outs on large green sheets of continuous pages.

As he was explaining his proposal on the issues that engendered the use of penicillin, I noticed that on the top sheet of each patient’s record was their name, address, phone, and place of employment.

Oy!! So, if Rabbi Jimmy Kessler was given penicillin for an STD,

this resident, who was NOT my doctor would know about me.

Fortunately, I was not in that survey, but the freedom with which he got the info bothered me.

So, I decided to try the security of the system. I put on a coat and tie, my UTMB ID card and went off to the half-opened door in that John Sealy hall.

I approached the door and when it came my term and the card clipped to my lapel, I asked for Shelley Gail Nussenblatt's file, and I said, "I'm Dr. Kessler."

Without a question, the person behind the half door walked off down the long walk way and in a couple of minutes was approaching me with my wife's file. Now Shelley grew up in Galveston and had been seen by a faculty member once in a while and hence had a file.

All of sudden, it dawned on me that if I took that file, I might be breaking the law. So, when the person approached me, I said something like, "Oh I'm sorry, but I've been paged and will have to do this later. Thanks anyway". And, I walked off.

Well, at the next IRB meeting I launched my first irate complaint about how folk were being treated and how there was no privacy. It was fine to know that a person of certain age, height, weight, gender took penicillin for a certain STD, but not their name, address and employer.

Today the door is gone, and researchers can't get all the

personal info, only what is needed.

Maybe I had something to do with that.

I normally had very little to do with the office of the County Medical Examiner but one incident was enough for a lifetime.

I got a call from the children's hospital at UTMB about a child that had been on a cruise to Mexico with her mother. Part of the cruise was a tour of one of the somewhat active volcanoes. While walking on the tour, the volcano "belched" and some lava was thrown in the air, the young child looked up to see the lava, had her mouth open and some of the molten lava fell in her mouth and killed her.

The child was returned to the ship and when it docked in Galveston, the body was taken to UTMB. Apparently, the guidelines called for an autopsy; here the problems began.

The mother of the deceased child refused to allow the procedure, as she was an Orthodox Jew. The call came to me to see if I could resolve the issue. The lady had called her brother in NYC who was an attorney and he was ready to obtain a restraining order to stop the autopsy.

Without going through all the particulars, I did have a long conversation with the Medical Examiner who told me that the autopsy would benefit the family if they wanted to file a law suit against the cruise line. He was pretty sure it was the lava she swallowed that killed her.

After me telling him the Jewish issues and him telling me what the law requires, we reached a solution. He would do no invasive procedures and only look down her throat and take pictures. He felt that would satisfy the law and he'd give the pictures to the mom to use for evidence. My job now was to convince the mother and her brother not to sue UTMB.

Fortunately for me, the issue was not too difficult to proffer. The brother saw the wisdom and the mom was OK. I called Rabbi Joe Radinsky, Sr. Rabbi of United Orthodox Synagogue, in Houston to ask if the throat exam would be a problem. His assurance that even his colleagues in NYC wouldn't object, sealed the deal.

Though it was a sad departure from the Houston airport, all of those involved were satisfied with their involvement, except perhaps the cruise line.

Over my years I did have some dealings with the mayors of Galveston. Two were members of B'nai Israel: Barbara Crews and Lewis Rosen. On one occasion, a local businessman was running for mayor and would eventually win. While he was running his platform, he concerned himself with the fact that the city was allowing an "R" rated movie to be shown at the local theatre.

The movie was the "R" rated form of "Saturday Night Fever" with John Travolta where an oral sex scene appeared to take place in the back seat of a car.

At the same time, Mr. Manuel said nothing about the fact that

the nursing staff at UTMB was experiencing abuse, rapes and even a death when they walked to their cars after their shift. They had no garages for UTMB staff then; rather just open lots which left them vulnerable.

We also had a wonderful Greek Orthodox priest in town named Father Charles Anastasia who was also the chaplain for the GPD. Charles thought that every year the ministers should have lunch with the prisoners in the jail. We went to the jail kitchen to have lunch and were surrounded by trustees who made lunch.

Mr. Manuel came to speak about what he would do as mayor. He spoke about the movies and that we ministers should picket the mall against "Saturday Night Fever."

My Rabbinic colleague in town at that time was Rabbi Harold Friedman at Beth Jacob. He was a delightful gentleman. As Mr. Manuel went on and on about the movies, I got disturbed as Harold kept nodding his head affirming what Gus was saying. At some point I got tired and I sent Harold a note in Hebrew that said, "it doesn't say thought shall not f..., it says thou shall not murder" When he opened the note, read it and it dawned on him what I was saying, he responded out loud, "you're right" which Gus took as complete support from the Rabbi.

So, I raised my hand and suggested to the candidate that he ought to be more concerned about the nurses being assaulted at UTMB than what the kids were seeing at the mall. I reminded him (in a clean manner) that the Bible did not say we should not have intercourse, but it did say we should not

murder.

These words generated a standing ovation from the trustee prisoners operating the kitchen and that applause generated a significant amount of unhappiness for Mr. Manuel.

Well, he did become mayor, and one week after he took office, the City Health Department made their FIRST inspection of the churches kitchens. All of the clergy who went through this experience made it their business to call and blame me for the inspection. If I had not insulted the Mayor, we would have never had any issue.

Just one of those wonderful Galveston experiences.

When I first met my congregant Harris L. Kempner, Sr., he was the owner of US National Bank in Galveston and he was a member of the Philosophical Society of Texas. I know the former because I was in his office, and I knew the latter because his membership certificate hung on his office wall.

It was a very distinctive document and I wanted to know about the group. According to the Handbook of Texas, the Philosophical Society of Texas was founded on December 5, 1837, by twenty-six Texans who met in the capitol of the Republic of Texas at Houston. In many ways it was to be like “solons” of European courts that advised the royalty. In the case of the Republic, it advised the President.

I also learned that by tradition the life time membership was essentially the 200 wealthiest and most influential Texans, the

presidents of the universities and colleges in Texas. Among others, one priest, one minister and one rabbi were members though I don't know when the first of each were asked to join.

Rabbi Henry Cohen was a member and after his death, Rabbi Hyman Schachtel was the member. While I was Rabbi of B'nai Israel in Galveston, Rabbi Schachtel died.

I approached Harris Kempner to nominate me to be the next Rabbi member. Hence my membership in what is considered the most prestigious organization in Texas.

In 1996 Mayor Barbara Crews appointed me as chair of the Galveston Ethics Code Review Committee. The city had voted that the code needed review and so a committee was formed.

I served on that committee with Joe Jawarski who would later become mayor of the city.

We reviewed the then current code, suggested changes and even punishments for violations.

The City Council adopted the code but omitted the fines that were called for.

Once adopted, I was asked to serve as the first chair of the new Ethics Commission that would review complaints. Since the Council omitted the punishments, I declined to serve.

I didn't want to spend any more time on that project. Obviously, the very people who would be judged didn't want to

be judged or punished. Joe took on the chair and from that position became Mayor.

As best as I can remember the cause of this incident in Texas was that Governor John Connally wanted to be President and so he tried to get the date of the Texas primary moved. I recall he thought if the Texas primary was the first in the country, it would help his efforts to get the Democratic nomination.

There were a number of legislators who didn't want to assist him. So, they left town and hid from the Texas Rangers who the Governor sent to find them. I think they were hiding in a garage apartment in Austin.

They were referred to as the Killer Bees in that they killed the bill that might have helped the Governor become President.

One of those Killer Bees was Senator A.R. Babe Schwartz. Babe was my congregant AND he had arranged for me to give the invocation at the Texas Senate. What he didn't count on was the flight of the Killer Bees.

So, there was no Senate session the day I was supposed to say the blessing and there was no Babe, so I didn't get to give the invocation that time.

The neat thing was that Saturday Night Live did a skit on the Killer Bees and kept it as a part of the show a few years, and I could always say I too was stung by them.

I take you back to when I arrived at the HUC-JIR in June, 1967.

One of the things suggested to me was that I go to the American Jewish Archives and look up my name. I did and I looked up Texas as well.

Under Texas, I found only two cards. One card indicated that original records of the split of Congregation Beth Israel in Houston were stored in a restricted collection. The other card reported that a collection of the writings of Henry Cohen of Galveston, Texas were available for reading in the collection of the Archives.

Can you imagine two cards on the entire state of Texas and the history of its Jews!

Years before when I was in seventh grade at Pershing Junior High School in Houston, Texas the State began to require Texas History in 7th grade. At one point the teacher, Netty Barnes, stated that Jews did not have much to do with the history of Texas. Interestingly, her nephew, John Riley, is now a close friend and past Chaplain of UTMB.

I was both angry and sad. Why weren't Jews in Texas and why didn't they contribute to the history of the State.

That experience in Junior High and the lack of index cards on Texas in the American Jewish Archives lit a fire under me. So I began to suggest to possibly attentive ears that there was a history waiting to be written.

More over, it was b'shert that in my senior year at the Hebrew Union College I found that the School had a collection of copies

of Mexican Inquisition documents from the 1300's and I decided to write my Master's/Rabbinic Thesis on that material. From that material I learned that Jews came to the "new world" with conquistadores. If a Jew tax was paid, Jews could come if they didn't practice Judaism. Today, those folk are referred to as Crypto Jews.

Consequently, Jews were first in the USA in what was to become Texas. With that Texas brag in mind, the issue of Texas Jewish History was of even more importance, at least to me.

A dozen years later I am having lunch with a few folk in Galveston, including a member of my congregation, Temple B'nai Israel. After listening to me bemoan the absence of a significant record of the Texas Jewish experience, Harris L. Kempner, my congregant, invited me to either put up or shut up. He offered to finance a state-wide meeting that I thought would be necessary to establish a group to preserve and publish this yet to be cared for historical experience of Jews in Texas.

So, with Harris' \$3,000 I set about organizing a meeting. I called my friends Lonnie Schooler and David Schwarz and nudged them to help me put together a meeting. Then I chose San Antonio for the location for the first meeting because of the presence of the Alamo and also the new Institute of Texan Cultures.

And I invited Rabbi Jacob Radar Marcus, PhD, the father of American Jewish history and a teacher of mine at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion as our main speaker; his presence was a necessity.

I then chose to publish a letter in the three Jewish Anglo-presses in Houston, Dallas and Ft. Worth calling for all those interested in the history of the Jews to come to San Antonio for a meeting.

In March, 1980 a hundred Jews plus from all over Texas gathered in San Antonio to hear Rabbi Marcus speak on the concept of preserving the American Jewish experience. Following the lecture, the group constituted itself as a meeting and by acclamation declared the establishment of the Texas Jewish Historical Society and I was elected the first and founding president.

Dr. Marcus, a past president of the American Jewish Historical Society, issued 4 stern warnings at that time.

The first was to never own a building. There would always be some group of Jews who would want to have you take over their building and that would surely be the death of the Society. Just as they couldn't afford to keep it up, neither could a state-wide society. In that same regard, he suggested we never have an office or a paid professional staff. If the society could remain fluid and without fixed expenses, it could survive and grow; it did and has.

Dr. Marcus also urged us to find a way to maintain an archive without having to pay for it. Documents don't earn money but cost a great deal to preserve and disseminate. In response to this, I contacted Dr. Don Carlton, the Director of the Barker Texas History Center (Dolph Briscoe Center) at UT Austin. He immediately agreed to designate a Texas Jewish Historical

Society Collection in their archive and in exchange for caring for the materials and making them available, the materials would become the property of the Center.

The TJHS agreed to this arrangement and it has now been in force for forty plus years. The idea was not to interfere with or replace local collections but to maintain a repository for materials that had no secure home in their locale.

The folk were told that the Society should never lend its name to a publication or project unless some other professional or commercial group had invested in the effort. This would keep the Society from having to judge another's work and being involved with personality issues. Clearly this has been good advice.

The last warning was directed at me. Dr. Marcus warned me not to become the perpetual president of the organization. Moreover, he suggested that after my term of office, I ought to disappear for a few years. He felt my absence would insure that there were truly others seriously interested in the field and who were willing to take on the leadership of the new group. I followed his advice and I only have to look at the past three decades to see the validity in his recommendation.

The Texas Jewish Historical Society represents the achievement of hundreds of folk, both Jewish and non-Jewish, who have espoused an interest in the Texas Jewish experience. Their labors have insured that the efforts of those Jews who settled in the Lone Star State will not go unnoticed. Today's members include those who were present at the beginning as well as

others who have joined in later; all of who represent the heirs to and keepers of a rich heritage.

I was involved in the Austin community and I was directed by B'nai Israel to do so in Galveston and candidly, I did enjoy it. Certainly, one of the those was when the powers decided that one of the national research labs in viruses used for weapons should be on the UTMB Galveston campus. Folk would come from all over the country to use our lab and then take their results home to write their papers.

There would need to be an environment impact statement, and that would require input from the community and UTMB convincing everyone it was safe.

Unfortunately, to this date there has been no solution to getting the National Lab in Boston approved. To try and keep that from happening here, the school was good about getting well known and respected people to be on the committee to review and recommend the lab. I was on that committee.

Then when the lab was approved locally, and the government awarded the contract to Galveston, I was appointed to chair the liaison committee for the first three years. We were the folk who would be called if there was a leak into the air or a spill to the outside. Our job would be to tell the school what needs to be told to the community.

When all was said and done and before I left the committee, David Calander, UTMB President, told me that they obviously used me to get the lab approved. After all he noted that I was

one of the most trusted folk in town and if I said it was OK, it was OK. Not bad for a short, overweight, Texan rabbi.

So, I started a lunch study group and decided to hold it at Gaidos in their then small meeting room. It was nice cause folk could order what they wanted and spend as much as they wanted.

After a number of months, I asked one of the waiters what parents order for little kids. He told me usually French fries. I asked if they had grilled cheese sandwiches that I thought would be easy to make and told me NO.

So, I approached Paulie Gaido, a friend and owner, about grilled cheese sandwiches. He told me that such would not be possible. At night they changed grill tops and they couldn't toast the bread on those grills.

Walmart had just opened and I suggested he go buy a toaster oven and make the sandwiches in that toaster. He wasn't impressed with my suggestion.

A few weeks later I was at the restaurant and that same waiter asked if I had seen the new menu. He handed me an evening menu and there listed as an option was "Andy Kessler's Grilled Cheese Sandwich". I was dumbstruck; Andy is my son.

When I asked how they made them, he told me they just put the bread in a pan, toasted it, added cheese and made the sandwiches.

When I asked if they sold any that first weekend, he told me not to ask that way, rather how many 100 did they sell.

I was later told that the question was asked, and the answer taught to new waiters who Andy Kessler was cause there were strange rumors that it was an old wandering seaman, or an honored cook, or an old family friend who was a Catholic priest.

So, there I was, new to Galveston, minding my own business and trying to be a community Rabbi. One day there comes in the mail a letter from the Texas Department of Labor inviting me to a meeting in Austin. Moreover, they will pay the plane ticket both ways.

Candidly, I didn't know anything about the Texas Department of Labor nor what it did. The only thing that was in the papers on a state level was the fact that a Pastor Rolloff was operating homes and schools for unwed mothers and their children. The issue was that the pastor was spanking children 5 and under with wooden paddles.

A lot of folk were very upset with what he was doing, but his explanation was always taken from Proverbs 13.24 : who ever spares the rod spoils the child. However it's important to remember that in the next chapter is the warning that "in the mouth of the fool is a rod" (14:3).

Anyhow, it didn't have anything to do with me as there was no Rolloff home in Galveston. There was the Temple Academy housed at B'nai Israel but it was non-denominational, independent and non-residential.

But it was a free trip to Austin and I was going as “the” Rabbi from Galveston, so why not go; and I did.

The meeting was at one of the State Government Buildings on the grounds of the Capital building and there were about 18-20 folk. All religious traditions seemed to be represented, at least all the Christian ones and me, the one Jew. They were not only denominational representatives but also big churches and church schools.

The convener was a member of the office of the Texas Attorney General and was saying that this was the beginning of a Church State Relations Committee that could advise the State Government on issues of concern to the faith community.

Now I may have been the only dumb one there, but the only issue I think would be of concern to churches was Pastor Rolloff. I don’t think the Jewish community thought much of him and I’m sure didn’t agree with him, but generally it wasn’t our issue. At any rate, after listening to this gentleman for about 30 minutes, I raised my hand and inquired, “have you really brought us here to somehow deal with the Rolloff issue?”

He turned to me, smiled and said that was why they brought us all here. The Attorney General and Governor were hoping that our group would make a statement on the connection of religious traditions and secular government, and corporal punishment.

In the current matter, they were asking us to consider the issues of paddling children 5 and under and make some kind of unified

statement. I am sure they wanted us to say it was a “no-no.”

After a couple of hours, the AG rep suggested that we need to organize ourselves with a chair, vice chair and secretary. Now I did think about what it would be to become the chair when a little nun at the other end of the table said, “I think we should make the Rabbi our chair, so we can be led by a Rabbi again.”

Everyone but me laughed, and I was unanimously elected chair. So I came up to Austin as the schlep from little Galveston and went home the first chair of the Church State Relations Advisory Board of Texas.

Candidly I don't remember how many meetings we held though they were always in Austin, but never over-night. Some other issues raised for future concern was the requirement for reporting child abuse incumbent on everyone and revealing information given a clergy person in confidence. Did that only apply to Catholic priests or even to Rabbis?

However, the main topic before us was the issue of paddling <5 yos. We spent a few meetings on this one topic and how we might draft a response for the Attorney General.

One day it dawned on me to look at the Hebrew of the text that Pastor Rolloff was always quoting. In the text I thought I had found the answer and so I composed something like: we know that the Bible says to spare the rod is to spoil the child, but a few lines later, it says whoever uses the rod is a fool. We do not think Pastor Roloff is a fool, so we are sure he will abide by the AG's ruling not to use the paddle in compliance with the rest of

the Proverbs' quote.

It's funny that about 10 years ago, I read that the committee was again dealing with clergy privilege. I'm glad I was the first chair, but I was glad I had stepped down.

I have served under three Galveston County Sheriff's as one of their chaplains. I am not a licensed peace officer so that I don't have to tell the Sheriff anything. Moreover, I'm sure I'd never pass the tests.

Essentially my work is advisory to the Sheriff and the staff on issues that are essentially political and pr. Every once in a while, I visit with Jewish prisons or with some employee who wants visit with a minister.

However, once a young female officer was involved in trying to stop a person involved in crime and in shooting another deputy. The Sheriff asked me to inform the officer that the armed suspect she shot had died.

I reminded her in a roundabout way that once she put on the star, she took on the protection of her fellow citizens. In this case, the person she shot had raised a gun and was capable of doing harm to her as well as to the other lay folk. I was later told that I did a great job. Even Andy heard about how well his dad did. It obviously made me feel very good. Thankfully I've only had to do it once – so far.

I have written about serving as the community representative near 30 years on the Institutional Review Board at UTMB that

reviews any research that involved humans.

Perhaps 10-15 years ago, it came to light that PhD's were being permitted to do muscle biopsies. That means they injected a site on a person's thigh with an anesthetic, they cut about a 1-inch incision in the flesh, they inserted a troch long enough to enter the muscle, withdrew a piece of the muscle, sewed up the site with a couple of stiches and sent the person on their way.

Now these folk doing the biopsy were trained to do this procedure, but we never were told who trained them. Moreover, their PhD could have been in anything – it did not have to be in any form of medicine. None were trained or credentialed as emergency folk or as health care folk.

I suggested they could have been janitors!

So began my second crusade on the IRB. It worried me that many of the protocols involved seniors who after exercising would have the biopsy done. What if they had a stroke or a seizure or a heart attack? How would this PhD respond?

The best the protocol could say was that “there was a doctor in the building.” Where and what building?

Aside from caring about the person going through the procedure who I thought was at a major risk since they didn't know who was doing the procedure, I thought of the newspaper headlines that UTMB had murdered a research volunteer.

After a few years of complaining, I managed to get UTMB to agree that a warning had to be placed in the consent form that a non-health care professional would perform the muscle biopsy and that they were trained.

Two of my friends, the chair of surgery and the chair of medicine, weren't happy about my raising this issue. They asked me individually to please leave it alone. After all, under Texas law, any physician can delegate to a non-health care trained person the right to do any medical procedure as long as they would put their license on the line.

And, I was asked to remember that having to use a licensed person would raise the cost of research and slow it down.

I never turned loose. As a matter of fact, I sent a return receipt requested letter to the IRB office that I was unalterably opposed to this policy and I would always vote "no" on these protocols. And, I did.

Then in 2012 a new director of sponsored research arrived, Anne Clark, who was intent on bringing UTMB in line with all the other facilities doing research in Texas. I brought this issue to her attention and she told me she'd look in to it.

On May 6, 2016, at a joint committee meeting of the two IRBs, we were told that after conversation with the UT system attorneys, it was decided that beginning in September, 2016 invasive biopsies can only be done by licensed health care professionals who are obviously trained to handle medical emergencies.

The joint committee applauded me for my efforts. I think many agreed over the years, but couldn't vote their conscience as it would anger their employer. Not bad for a big mouthed Rabbi.

A major addition was being added to the John Sealy Hospital Tower on the ground floor and it was going to include a new chapel. As part of the fund-raising efforts, several stained-glass windows were being sold and designated.

The Board of the Temple decided to purchase one of the windows and have it dedicated to TBI and me. Today the window still stands and is by B'nai Israel in honor of Rabbi Jimmy Kessler.

Someday it will be torn down, but at least I've had the pleasure of seeing it for a number of years.

Actually, I found the money to pay for it, so the Temple didn't have to spend the money. Not unusual. I never asked or supported spending CBI money unless I had already found it outside the budget.

September 13, 2008 hurricane Ike came ashore in Galveston and did major damage. We had left that morning for Austin where Jenny our daughter was in her last year at UT. We watched the storm come ashore that night on a restaurant's tv.

We returned to Houston and stayed in the Kozberg's condo that the kids were trying to sell.

Large yachts were on the highway leading to the Island, they

having been washed on shore by the storm.

When we did go back on the Island to see our house, the damage was significant. Our house looked fine from the outside, but as one looked closer, the damage was significant. The inside was washed through and the furniture now ruined was scattered everywhere. At any rate, we sold the house and now rent an apartment in downtown Galveston.

The major problem in my mind was that all the public housing was destroyed and though they planned on rebuilding it, the problem was in my mind was jobs.

It is my opinion that to bring low income workers back to Galveston with no jobs would be a crime.

And, so I appeared before the Galveston City Council and presented my opinion.

“Good Afternoon:

I’m Jimmy Kessler and I have lived in Galveston for twenty-six years. I appear before you today to remind you of our community’s responsibility for those who seek to make a better life for themselves and their families.

In what I understand to be your most current proposal for subsidized housing in Galveston, the emphasis is upon home ownership. More over it also calls for reducing the concentration of living facilities in limited areas.

If my surmise is correct, then I congratulate you on your decision. The American dream is still to have a good job and to own your own home. You all are in the position to ensure that at least one half of that dream is tenable through your build-to-own program.

You must hear the cry of those who stand now where many of our ancestors stood when they began a move up the socio-economic ladder. You must encourage that move; you must not stifle it.

As a student of history, it's easy to see that Galveston has always been a home to diversity. From those who live temporarily under the over pass to those on the stock exchanges, from those with no education to those with multiple doctorates, from those who need help to those who give it = Galveston has been their home. If that blend ceases to exist, Galveston will cease to exist. Not what it used to be but rather what it is and what it can be.

To those who seek to use the law to oppose such replacement as you recommend, I would only remind them to remember from whence they came. Moreover I remind them of to where they might return should life turn on them.

You have in your hands the ability to provide a new vision of Galveston: a community of homes for all. I would remind you of the words from Emma Lazarus' poem on the Statue of Liberty: "*Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses, yearning...*"

My friends, we have fellow citizens who yearn; who yearn to be in their own homes; who yearn not to live in congested apartment projects; who yearn to share in the American dream right here in Galveston, Texas; who yearn to share in all the dreams that each of us possess.

You can do no less than to allow them the chance to satisfy that yearning.

May God be with you in all you do, and may you remember that my children and your children will hold you to account for what you do this day.”

In 2009 at RH services, as I was standing on the pulpit, I noticed a guy in the outside lobby dressed in jeans and a sport shirt. I thought he was one of the aides who accompanied clients from TLC.

It wasn't uncommon for folk to be dressed casually and assisting Jewish patients from the Transitional Learning Center who attended services. Anyhow, services ended, and I walked over to wish someone on the pulpit a good *yuntif* and when I turned I was face to face with this guy.

Before I could say anything, he began witnessing to me that I had no right to call myself a Rabbi and that Jesus was the only true Rabbi.

I did several dumb things in responding. I told him that I couldn't speak to him here and that he should FOLLOW ME out side; I lead him out the front door and STOOD NEAR HIM TO

SPEAK; I told him HE WAS TRESPASSING AND HAD TO LEAVE OUR PROPERTY NOW and the I FOLLOWED HIM AS HE WALKED AWAY. None the less he did walk away but did preach at me a couple of more times.

Candidly I was a bit scared though our off-duty deputy sheriff was on the property and so was Eric Nevelow, the past chief deputy of the Sheriff's Department. I was later told by all of them including from the Chair of Psychiatry that one should never confront folk who are a bit crazy. Thankfully it hasn't happened again.

So, I stood where Lincoln stood. Out of nowhere I received a letter from the office of the secretary of the US House of Representatives informing me that I was invited to deliver the invocation and it had been arranged by Congressman Nick Lampson.

I was overcome, but obviously I said yes. So, Shelley and Jenny and Andy and I flew to DC and stayed at the Moody's hotel, the Washington. We toured the capital, had supper with Mr. Lampson and showed up the next day at the House side of the Capital.

I learned that members of the party not in the majority were not allowed behind the House chamber where the Speaker's office was – only members of the majority party. As a result, the only picture I could have made with Nick was outside on the steps of the Capital. I could go back but not him.

As I walked to the podium and stood waiting to be called on by

the Speaker of the House I realized that I was standing where Lincoln and Kennedy and LBJ stood. Wow, what a rush!

In 1977 a White Party candidate for Mayor of Galveston was also a member of the American Nazi Party. Among the clergy there was discussion about how many votes the guy would get. I thought about 100 but he got less than that.

There was a note in the newspaper that he was going to hold a news conference on the steps of City Hall one afternoon. Well I just couldn't pass up the opportunity of hearing what this guy had to say.

So about 30 or 40 minutes before, I headed over to the City Hall and parked about a block away. That allowed me to walk over thinking that I would come up in the back of the crowd and not be seen.

As I walked east on toward 25th Street on the south side of City Hall, I looked left and to my amazement there were only three people in front of the building. The candidate, a reporter and a television cameraman – and no one else.

As I looked, it quickly dawned on me that the morning Galveston paper could likely carry an article showing a picture where the only person in attendance at the Nazi rally was the Rabbi of B'nai Israel.

So, I did a 180' turn, went back to my car and laughed all the way back to the Temple. The Nazi didn't win and got less than 100 votes.

Now the story doesn't end there.

Several days after the rally, two folk in town whose names should not be mentioned showed up in my office. They entered, closed the door, sat down and proposed the following.

“Rabbi, if you think it would be better for this Nazi not to run for office, we can arrange for him to simply disappear.”

Candidly I really didn't know what to say. No one had ever asked for “Rabbinic permission to kill someone for the good of the Jewish community.” I'd like to hope I didn't take long to answer that I wasn't in favor of them arranging for that accident on the wharf. Moreover, I don't know if they left my office disappointed in my response and in me. None the less I know I answered correctly, but I wonder what I've done if he was a WW II Nazi in hiding.

I really do love this job.

Then there was the year I was asked to be the speaker for the annual dinner and meeting of the NAACP. Wow, not anything I would have ever expected. So here's what I had to say:

My Friends:

Permit me to begin with a thank you for this very distinguished honor. Being asked to speak this evening is clearly a privilege. I am most appreciative.

I should forewarn you not to get too comfortable. You see, I

made a promise to my congregation back in 1976 that I came with a warranty. That warranty states that I shall expend every effort to adhere to the rule that says that if you haven't struck oil in 15-20 minutes, quit boring! Do know that I have rarely broken that guarantee.

As many of you know, I am a storyteller. Not the liar type, but rather the tale teller type. With that in mind, I want to share with you an African American folktale from the 1920's in Florida.

It is said that the wind is a woman and the water is a woman too, and they loved to talk together. After all, they were closely related. The clouds came from the water and the clouds dropped the rain. Mrs. Wind used to go sit down at the ocean and talk and patch and crochet. Mrs. Wind and Mrs. Water were just like all lady people, talking about their children and bragging on them.

Mrs. Water would say that her children go from the biggest to the smallest in the world; and of every color and shape. The wind lady bragged louder and longer than the water woman reminding her friend that her children even had white feather wisps. As a matter of fact, it got to be too much for the water lady. So, tired of hearing about Mrs. Wind's children, she devised a plan.

One day, a whole bunch of Mrs. Wind's children came to visit and said, "Mama, we're thirsty. Can we get a cool drink of water?" "Sure ... just run over to Mrs. Water but hurry back. As the children were quenching their thirst, Mrs. Water drowned

them all.

Mrs. Wind looked everywhere and even asked Mrs. Water if she had seen them. Mrs. Water said no. Finally, Mrs. Wind went searching for her children. As she passed over Mrs. Water, she called the names of her kids. Every time that she did, the white feathers would come to the top of the surface, yet the wind never saw them. And at the same time, the water never had real peace and calm again.

My friends, it is a sad story, but it teaches an important lesson. If we succumb to spending our time bragging and being devious; if we choose not to listen to those who care about us; if we turn on those who have sought to be with us; if we move to divide ourselves; then, we are doomed to never find rest again or to know true blessing.

Unfortunately, something is happening in our country that is very disturbing. The gap between those who have and those who have less is increasing. Not just as in the past, but rather exponentially. Moreover, there are more finding themselves in the have less and those in the have category have larger amounts of *have*.

At the same time that this phenomenon is happening, the alliances of the past, those relationships in which a diverse group of citizens united for the benefit of all, are coming apart. And the threats to a healthy society are even more sophisticated and devious. And, the attempts to enhance the ties seem to meet with significant resistance. It is true in Galveston as well.

Instead of remembering the achievements of the past, there is a current thinking of many to exclude those who would want to be a part of efforts to make life better for all. These exclusionary practices tend to serve the wants of a few over the needs of the many.

There is no question that many have been wronged in the past. Certainly, some of you in this room have experienced more than any one human being should have to. Surely the wounds are deep, but if they guide us into tomorrow, we face nothing but an endless tunnel with no useful end. If we don't learn from the past, we will be doomed to live it all over again.

We have managed to come together on many issues. For some of you who are a bit older than I, civil rights was a wonderful example. More recently it was to deal with gangs on the campuses of our schools, and even more recently, the entire community of ministers who waked the halls of Ball High after Columbine. In spite of these glowing events, somehow or another the willingness to welcome the supporting stranger has waned in our community. I would hope that is only a short-term aberration. I would pray that it doesn't continue. New comer friends are certainly worth involving but not at the expense of those who have been here long before and have long ago proved their commitment.

I have tried to be somewhat inexact in my comments. It's because I have no right to point a finger, for if I did, it would clearly be directed toward me and the things I have failed to do in town. So, my message this evening is as much for me as it is for you.

Please, please, let us once again join hands. Let us put aside those hurtful issues which though they are legitimate, surely shouldn't be permitted to divide us. Let us rather follow that often-used Scriptural verse and "reason together".

My faith tradition teaches that one should always end their words with an upbeat message. There is a story told of two poor folk who used to hear of a beautiful garden in their community but which neither of them ever could enjoy. One of the folk was blind and the other was unable to walk. Finally, the blind one said, if I put you on my shoulders, you can direct me where to walk and the two of us can get to the garden and enjoy the fruits. And so they did, and so they did.

May we be just as wise and make that fateful move to come together again.

I've had several opportunities to reflect back on my being a rabbi and what were the major influences. One was clearly Echo Hill Ranch that Min and Tom Friedman (Kinky's parents) created and ran. Three years after its opening, Echo Hill Ranch became my summer home for a total of 14 years.

The first time I went to camp, I arrived on the chartered bus from Houston, a frightened fat kid who wasn't sure how he was going to survive six weeks in a place with no air conditioning, bugs and bunk beds. I left as a camper who wanted to return and just knew I had found a place of which to be a part.

Under the guiding hands of Min and Tom Friedman, EHR strengthened the talents of each camper and helped others to

identify and use talents they didn't know they possessed. Each youngster was made to feel special and each need was addressed while still making the kiddo a part of the group.

I spent four years as a camper, received the prized Echo Hill belt and pen set, and then became a counselor in training and later a counselor. I learned the importance of each person as a special blessing even when they were difficult. More over I came to understand that taking a little time or spending a little more money to recognize a person's worth was beyond measurable value.

The ten years as a counselor taught me how to listen and to how ask appropriate questions. The tutelage of the Friedmans and the other counselors expanded my understanding of people and their life experiences. The mixture of the staff embellished my awareness of the world in which I lived. It was an incredible education.

AND, EHR was fun. Mud fights, short-sheeting beds, snipe hunts and camp outs spiced with arts and crafts, the horseback riding, the swimming, the rifle shooting, the nature study, the archery and a host of other programs that made up daily life those summers. Added to that were the wonderful evening programs that brought bunks together in performances, skits, song contests and campfires.

The early challenges to get involved and participate along with the later responsibilities to getting others to be involved and participate gave me tools that I use regularly as a Rabbi. Clearly if I have had any successes in serving the Jewish

community, much of the credit goes to my years at Echo Hill and the experiences gained there.

Today, many of my friends from all stages of my life shared years at the Hill. Kinky (Richard Friedman) and I began in the same bunk while Roger (Dr. Roger Friedman, EHR Director) was just a little kid; and Marcie wasn't born yet. I may forget some of the names, but the memories continue to live on and my gratitude only increases. Green trees.

Shelley and I went to Cuba with the Texas Jewish Historical Society in 2014. The following are some thoughts recorded during our visit. Cuba: Though there may be some Jews in Cuba who can trace their roots back to the Spanish colonial period up to 1500, most of them are Jews who came from Europe in the 1800s. They came hoping to go from there to the USA. That continued to be achieved through WWII if not later.

Many Jews fled the Revolution and many stayed siding with Communism.

Since the Revolution, the Jews who remained became supporters of Castro. As a result of their support, the Jewish community was given freedoms that other religious groups were denied. Churches have been closed and converted to other purposes. One of the synagogues runs a seniors program as well as a pharmacy dispensing drugs for not only Jews but for the community. Seems the government and Cubans don't like the missionaries that come; they try to dupe the folk into converting by promising money.

It may have come from the idea that some of the early originators of Communism were Jews in Russia and Karl Marx in a British Library. More over some Jews had wealth they were willing to use to support the new government.

Havana has three congregations. There is no Rabbi in the country. It may be that they don't want one as not having one allows them to interpret Jewish law in a manner that keeps the community alive even if it means overlooking some issues.

Chabad sent some Rabbis, but the community sent them home. Since they weren't willing to recognize mixed marriages or children without *brit milah*, they weren't welcome.

It's interesting that two of the synagogues are lead by women. Adella is viewed as the head of the entire Cuban Jewish community. She has a close relationship with Fidel and Raul. Through her, the government has allowed a member of the community to go to Israel and be certified as a *shochet*. He is permitted to slaughter meat not only for those who can get kuarks but pesos as well.

The Jewish community obtains "Jewish" stuff mostly from Canada.

Bris, conversion, and marriages are done by Orthodox Rabbis from Argentina or Brazil. That way no Jewish physician has to ask for special privileges to do a circumcision at the hospitals; Cubans don't do circs so asking to do one would cause the docs to be ostracized.

My opinion is that the young folk come to the synagogues as they provide a “community” in a country where everyone is considered a part of the total populace. This way they aren’t lost, and they can still practice their traditions which are acceptable to other Cubans.

I think we were told that Castro said Israel should exist but, in the past, they did support the Arabs but that may be because they see Israel and the US as one.

Over the years, I was very involved with area clergy of all faiths and particularly the Christian community. It was only after a number of decades since its creation did the Galveston-Houston Diocese of the Roman Catholic Church become a Arch-Diocese and became the seat of an Archbishop, a Cardinal.

The Catholic community of Galveston Houston had grown significantly, in Houston, not in Galveston. Daniel DiNardo came to Houston to ultimately succeed to the head of the diocese and was later raised to Cardinal.

He came to visit the Houston Rabbinic Association and I went to Houston to meet him. When I arrived at Beth Israel, I saw a man in a collar visiting with one of the Rabbis. I walked up and began by saying, “Hi, I’m Jimmy Kessler and I’m from the southern end of your diocese. And, I’ve been told to note that if you should think to change the name to Houston-Galveston, we will take up arms against you.”

He smiled, chuckled and said, “you must be from Galveston.” I

told him I was and that I was Jimmy Kessler from B'nai Israel. By then a few Rabbis had gathered and they looked very unhappy as I'm sure they thought I was destroying Jewish Catholic relations.

I went to have lunch and sat a ways from the head of the table. The Cardinal came in and sat beside me. As he was sitting down, I said, "great, now you can explain to me why you closed O'Connell school, sold the Bishop's Palace and haven't rehabbed St. Mary's Cathedral." He dropped his box lunch on the table and said, "maybe I should sit elsewhere." I smiled and told him to please sit next to me and if when he came to the Island, I'd feed him if his priests wouldn't"

We had a pleasant visit and in June he came to speak at the Temple. His first time in a synagogue in his diocese.

When I look back over the 36 years, I remember something was said about Rabbi Cohen, was also said about me. "I don't belong to a church but that's okay cause I have a Rabbi."

Obviously, it is a wonderful compliment.

Though I have left out close friends in the Congregation and on the Island, those stories are for another time.

So, I'll stop here!!

General Biography

Rabbi Jimmy Kessler, DHL, DD
Galveston, TX 77550
jimmykessler@gmail.com

James Lee (Jimmy) Kessler is a native Houstonian and a graduate of San Jacinto Senior High School, and the University of Texas from which he received a BA in Zoology in 1967. Rabbi Kessler received his ordination from the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati in 1972. In 1972 he wrote a Master’s Thesis on the Mexican Inquisition. In addition, he earned the first doctorate in Texas Jewish History and an honorary doctorate from HUC-JIR.

Rabbi Kessler has written three books, *Henry Cohen, a Frontier Rabbi*, *Congregation B’nai Israel, History of a BOI*, *Songs for the Soul*, and edited *Deep in the Heart: The Lives and Legends of Texas Jews*. In addition, he has written numerous midrash and folktales.

Kessler has spent all but one year of his Rabbinic career in Texas serving as Director of the University of Texas Hillel Foundation in Austin (1972-75) and the Rabbi in Galveston and Victoria (5 years). His one year out of state was in Alexandria. During his years in Austin Rabbi Kessler served as president of the Campus Ministers Association enhancing interfaith relations between the Jewish, Christian and Muslim faculty and students.

Rabbi Kessler served Temple B'nai Israel in Galveston for 32 years. He retired in 2014 and was designated Rabbi Emeritus, a title that was only bestowed on Rabbi Henry Cohen at B'nai Israel. During Kessler's tenure he was president of the Galveston Ministerial Alliance three times, chair of the Community of University Ministers at UTMB, was an adjunct faculty member at Galveston Community College and taught for the Osher Life Long Learning Institute at UTMB, Rabbi Kessler is the first Rabbi in the history of Freemasonry in Texas to be elected the presiding officer (Worshipful Master) of a Masonic Lodge (Harmony #6, Galveston) and is a 33° Mason of Scottish Rite Masonry and was a member of the Chapter and Council of York Rite Masonry. Rabbi Kessler served as the Grand Chaplain of the Most Worshipful Grand Lodge of Texas in 2015.

Rabbi Kessler was the inaugural chair of the Community Liaison Committee for the National Laboratory at UTMB and served 28 plus years on the Institutional Review Board of UTMB. In addition, he served on the board of the Jewish Federation of Galveston County, on the Board of the Galveston Seaman's Center, and on the Board of United Way of Galveston as well as the Salvation Army.

Rabbi Kessler is the founder and first president of the Texas Jewish Historical Society in 1980 (now 40 years old), was Jewish Editor of the Handbook of Texas, past chair of the Church Relations Advisory Board of the State of Texas, a member of the Philosophical Society of Texas, and a director of the Abe and Annie Siebel Fund, the Abe and Peggy Levy Fund, the Lipson Fund, and the Charles Meyer Fund. He

currently serves as the Chaplain to the Galveston County Sheriff's Office and as a visiting Jewish Minister at UTMB. Rabbi Kessler is married to Shelley Nussenblatt Kessler. They have two children and three grandchildren.

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Masonic Biography

Rabbi Jimmy Kessler, DHL, DD
Galveston, TX 77550
jimmykessler@gmail.com

Rabbi Jimmy Kessler is a Past Master of Harmony Lodge #6, AF&AM in Galveston, Texas. He has been a member of the Lodge for 40 plus years. He served a second year as Master and was the first Rabbi to serve as the Master of a Texas Lodge in the history of the Grand Lodge of Texas.

Kessler is a full member of the Grand Lodge of Research of Texas, is a 33' member of the Galveston Scottish Rite Bodies, Mother Consistory of Texas" and a member of the Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons of Texas and the Grand Council of Royal and Select Master of Texas and he served one year as Illustrious Grand Chaplain in Texas. In addition, Kessler served as the Grand Chaplain of the Grand Lodge of Texas.



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