

The Synagogue Journal

1856-2006

November 17, 2006

HistoricalJournal@KaneStreet.org

Shabbat Chayei Sarah

Issue 46

The Congregation

In this issue ...

The Journal explores Kane Street Synagogue's strong sense of family -- What is it about our synagogue that attracts people? Who belongs to this family? What are its practices? What keeps the congregation vital? The narratives in this week's Torah portion focus on the continuity of family. After Sarah's death Abraham establishes the ancestral burial site of the Cave of Machpelah. He then sends Eliezer on a journey to secure a suitable wife for Isaac from his native land. Isaac and Rebecca marry. The reading concludes with the genealogy, death and burial of Abraham. Throughout the text there is a sense of premonition and destiny that, through their complicated family journeys, these characters are fulfilling a mission to grow from a small local clan to an *Edah*, a "witnessing community" that bears witness to God's Oneness and Righteousness. The word *Edah* is later used for "Congregation."

The *ruach* (spirit) of Kane Street is due in part to a sense of connectedness to the greater Jewish community. Our synagogue's leaders helped develop Conservative Judaism. Dr. Aaron Wise, founder of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, came to this country in 1874 through the auspices of the Boerum Place Synagogue. Rabbi Wise, throughout his life, maintained his gratitude to his first American congregation. Rabbi Israel Goldfarb, a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary, was a member of Solomon Schechter's first graduating class and maintained strong ties with JTS as an instructor of *Hazzanut* [cantorial studies] and as the President of the New York Board of Rabbis. In 1913, three men from the congregation, Rabbi Goldfarb, Michael Salit and Isaac Applebaum, were among the twenty-two founders of United Synagogue of America. (It became United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism in 1992). BIAE leader Louis Moss served as USCJ President from 1931-1944. The Journal includes both the Moss obituary and a brief history of United Synagogue from the organization's website.

Our longtime affiliations with both United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and the Theological Seminary of America have been fruitful. If you're reading this Journal online, then you're connected to United Synagogue. Kane Street Synagogue's proximity to JTS (45 minutes on the #1 train) has led many wonderful teachers, principals and Rabbis to our doors. One of the most newsworthy JTS graduates was Rabbi Debra Cantor, led Kane Street for eight years. The Journal provides a *New York Daily News* clipping from 1988 at the beginning of her tenure. In the article she states, "There are only eight female Rabbis in the Conservative movement. It's not traditional for women to serve as rabbis, so my appointment is significant." Rabbi Cantor's appointment was significant in different ways; several families left Kane Street to organize an Orthodox congregation, B'nai Avraham.

Thankfully, many others felt a new vitality within the congregation; the vitality has continued for eighteen years. A number of articles illustrate Kane Street Synagogue's inimitable style. Rabbi Sam Weintraub reflects on the many men and women who have converted to Judaism during his ten years at Kane Street, noting that their commitment has sharpened his own commitment and theology. Tim Rucinski deftly relates his journey as a convert. Membership Chair Mickey Green offers a tally on the congregation today. To sum up the congregation, the Journal concludes with the Kashruth policy for the synagogue kitchen. After all, "We are what we eat."

Special thanks to: Rabbi Sam Weintraub; Tim Rucinski; Mickey Green; *The New York Daily News*; *The New York Times*; United Synagogue of America; www.USCJ.org; Jewish Theological Seminary of America, www.JTSA.edu.

Happy Thanksgiving,
Carol Levin, Editor
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This past September the Board of Trustees approved a new policy on Kashruth that was prepared by the Rabbi and members of the Ritual Committee.

“From the Beginning...”

In 1913 Congregation Baith Israel Anshei Emes was one of twenty-two synagogues that organized United Synagogue of America. The Journal provides a history of this organization, which currently has more than 800 affiliated congregations. Credit: Adapted from "The First Seventy-Five Years" by Dr. Ruth B. Waxman; the United Synagogue Biennial Report, 1987-1989

Courtesy: www.uscj.org/history.html

Louis J. Moss Obituary

The obituary of BIAE leader Louis Moss, United Synagogue President from 1931-1944, illustrates the congregation's interests in civic and Jewish welfare.

Credit: *New York Times*, March 19, 1948

“Rabbi gets set for her new hurdle”

This *New York Daily News* article from August 31, 1988 is of an interview with Rabbi Debra Cantor as she began her tenure at Kane Street Synagogue.

Credit: Robert Fleming, staff writer; Anthony Pescatore, Photography

Making Kane Street Accessible to All

Credit: *L'Dor VaDor*, January 2002

This article by Mickey Green and Rob Stulberg from the Renewal Project newsletter anticipated that the renovation would open “our doors a bit wider than before.”

On the Path of Abraham and Sarah

By Rabbi Samuel Weintraub

Rabbi Weintraub has served as the congregation's Rabbi since 1996. He is particularly concerned with the relevance of Jewish texts and traditions to social issues, and with outreach to the unaffiliated.

One of the most gratifying aspects of my Rabbinate at Kane Street has been the engagement of converts to Judaism. We are truly living in an unprecedented era in this regard. As Wade Clark Roof writes in his acclaimed study, "A Generation of Seekers," Americans today, while fairly religious, are also voluntarily religious. They often as adults choose a denomination or religion which is different than that of their upbringing.

So, many now come to Judaism. Some come because of romantic relationships with Jews, but many come as individuals, searching for moral anchors and spiritual meaning in a secular, materialistic and alienating society. They find in Judaism ways to make their lives *Kadosh*, holy.

They often become very serious Jews and Jewesses. In our own Synagogue, converts have become Rabbis and Synagogue Presidents. The sociologist Dr. Egon Mayer, of blessed memory, a pioneering student of intermarriage, pointed out that conversionary marriages, where one spouse has converted to Judaism, score high in every aspect of Jewish attitudes and behavior, particularly with regard to Synagogue affiliation, home religious practices and providing Jewish education for children. It is frequently the case that these families score higher on indicators of Jewish commitment than many endogamous Jewish families, where both spouses were born as Jews.

In ten years at Kane Street, I estimate that I have taught and sponsored about sixty *Gerei Tzedek*, righteous converts. They are earnest and searching people who have helped me to refine my own commitments and sharpen my own theology. Their purity and openness has reminded me of the fundamental values of Judaism. They come from all backgrounds, which reflects the wonderfully multicultural character of Brownstone Brooklyn today. Over just the last few years I have sponsored converts whose native countries included Panama, Brazil, Malaysia, Korea, Japan, Czechoslovakia, Russia and Mexico. Some chose conversion after falling in love with a Jew. For some, the decision was not made until after a child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah. I have also sponsored a number of men and women who came to Judaism because of an intimate relationship, which eventually terminated, but whose commitment to conversion and Judaism survived the relationship.

While their journeys are each unique, converts often share similar attractions to Judaism: They like Judaism's openness, questioning and honoring of different interpretations. They value the Jewish emphasis on the deed rather than the creed as well as on the family and communal solidarity. They find the optimism of Judaism and the absence of "original sin" refreshing. And they like the psychological realism of the whole idea of Mitzvah, of acting righteously because of a fundamental sense of obligation, rather than waiting for inspiration or miracles.

As I have shared in sermons, I believe that Synagogues and organized Jewish religious communities should be more proactive with respect to embracing converts. I am not talking, G-d forbid, about coercion or manipulation, about shouting in airport terminals or leafleting in Times Square. I am talking about devoting communal resources to develop rich, pedagogically sophisticated plans and trained lay and Rabbinic mentors to embrace, socialize, instruct and connect those searchers who come into our midst. This is the proper Jewish way to act, the way of Abraham and Sarah, and the Talmudic Rabbis who included several distinguished converts. It is also in our self interest. If we have the apparatus of education and acculturation in place, we would then assure more Jewish homes, more Jewish families, more Jewish children with positive and un-ambivalent attachments to their faith.

By the Numbers: Kane Street at 150 Years

Compiled by Mickey Green

- 1 Number of households? 290
- 2 Number of children eighteen or under? 225
- 3 Number of babies born in 2006? 18
- 4 Number of people going to Israel in 2006? 40 - 50
- 5 Number of Sifrei Torah? 11
- 6 Number of people attending Shabbat morning services? 180
- 7 Number of seats in the Sanctuary? 864
- 8 Number of Rabbis as members? 4
- 9 Number of sets of twins? 5
- 10 Number of sets of triplets? 1
(Aden, Leo & Elias are aged 3)
- 11 Number of B'nai Mitzvah in 2006? 15
- 12 Number of students enrolled in the Hebrew school? 61
- 13 Number of years at this site? 101
- 14 Number of years the building has existed? 151
- 15 Number of board members? 25
(plus 8 officers)
- 16 Number of living past presidents? 13
- 17 Number of years of the longest active membership? 40
(Seth & Judy Greenwald)
- 18 Number of Life Trustees? 5

Kashruth – Jewish Dietary Laws – For the Kitchen at Kane Street Synagogue

Kashruth, the dietary laws, are central to a Jewish life. By observing the laws of Kashruth, we bring *K'dushah*, sanctity, into the profane act of eating. We discipline and elevate our most regular physical activity. We remind ourselves of G-d's *Hashgacha*, purposeful presence in the most mundane, elemental activities of our life. Kashruth creates and infuses a Jewish atmosphere into the home, and unites Jews around the globe and across the generations. Finally, Kashruth, through its limitation of the kinds of animals we may kill, and through the humane methods of *shchi'ta*, teaches a reverence for life.

Jewish life cycle events are accompanied by a *S'udat Mitzvah*, a festive, sumptuous meal which is part of the religious celebration. Our Goldman Educational Center offers a Kosher Kitchen and large, convivial social hall and atrium for *S'udot* and receptions. We also encourage sponsorship of *Kiddushes* and lunches following services in honor of personal and family milestones (*Yahrzeit*, anniversaries of Bar/Bat Mitzvah, graduation, retirement, etc). Sponsorship of Shabbat Kiddush is also a Mitzvah because it assures a proper Shabbat meal for all, enables us to perform *Hachnasat Orchim* - the welcome of newcomers - and builds our *kehilla*, community.

Our Synagogue Policies

The kitchen of Kane Street Synagogue is supervised by its Rabbi, Rabbi Weintraub. Kosher caterers may use the kitchen with the Rabbi's permission. No Synagogue member or nonmember may use the kitchen without the permission of Rabbi Weintraub. No one may use the kitchen without the supervision of a certified *Mashgi'ach*, Rabbi Weintraub, or one of our lay *Machshirim*, Kashruth supervisors, whom Rabbi Weintraub trains and appoints. The Synagogue will also offer from time to time classes in Kashruth to familiarize people with its laws and their specific application in our kitchen.

Our kitchen has a meat side with a meat counter, sink and dishwasher, and a dairy side with a dairy counter, sink and dishwasher. Those preparing a meat meal should cover and not use the dairy side and *vice versa*. If more counter space is required the opposite covered side may be used to cut and prepare raw, cold fruit and vegetables with clean, cold utensils. The opposite sink, however, should be covered and not used.

Because the counters are of stainless steel, it is permissible to use the counter on the opposite side uncovered provided it is prepared by washing with boiling water and washed again with boiling water after it is used. If this technique is to be used, the Rabbi must be consulted concerning the exact methods to be used, and must expressly approve the use of cleaning with boiling water.

There is also a third "hand washing" sink which may be used for washing fruits and vegetables. Utensils and cookware should not be washed or used in this sink.

The conventional oven and warming ovens may be used at different times for milk and meat meals. If these foods are properly contained there is no need to *kasher* the oven after each use. For the warming oven, there are separate milk and meat racks. The microwave is only for dairy.

All food stored in the refrigerator should be carefully, fully contained and covered and clearly marked as meat, milk or *pareve*. There are special trays for milk and meat.

Prepared foods with an acceptable Rabbinic *Hechsher* label may be used in the kitchen. The office will keep a list of *Hechsher* labels recognized by the synagogue. Others may also be approved but should be submitted for approval well before the date on which the food is to be brought into the synagogue. Approval of previously unrecognized labels will be at the discretion of the Rabbi.

Foods prepared in private homes and cookware from private homes, even if the kitchen is kosher, may not be brought into our kitchen. Fresh baked goods must come from an establishment under rabbinic supervision. Kosher meats must come packaged and unopened from kosher butchers. Fresh kosher fish may be purchased at any market. If you are not using a kosher caterer, then all foods served in the Synagogue must be prepared in our kitchen with our cookware and dishes. Wines must have a *Hechsher*.

Israeli wines, which support the state and its citizens, are preferred. Although the Conservative Movement permits domestic cheeses without a rabbinic *Hechsher*, we require that cheeses have a *Hechsher* in order to include people of varying practices in our community.

The prohibition against mixing meat and milk extends to dishes, utensils, and dishcloths. Our meat and dairy cookware, silverware and plastic ware should not be used or washed together. For *pareve* meals (fish, eggs, tofu, pasta, etc.) use dairy dishes and utensils.

Because of the time needed for digestion, and as a symbol of concern for taking animal life, Jewish law mandates a waiting period between eating meat and milk. For that reason, Friday night *Onegs* and evening dessert meetings and receptions, after many have eaten meat, should be *pareve*.

“Refrain from doing business on My Holy Day, and call the Shabbat a delight.” (Isaiah 58:13)

We also have a number of rules because of the mitzvot of *Sh'mirat Haguf*, preserving a healthy body and *Sh'mirat Shabbat*, keeping a proper Shabbat atmosphere of rest and joy.

All food and other private or commercial deliveries must be made before 1PM on Friday, unless arrangements have been made with and confirmed by the office for later delivery. In no event may food be delivered later than one hour before sundown on Friday. No food should be cooked on Shabbat at the synagogue.

There is no smoking in the synagogue or on its grounds, and no photography or electronic equipment may be used or brought into the synagogue on Shabbat.

Food and other materials may be removed from the synagogue on Shabbat evening, after *Havdalah*, which marks the end of Shabbat.

“On the fifteenth day of this seventh month there shall be a Feast of Booths to the Lord, seven days.”

On *Sukkot*, to fulfill the *Mitzvah* of *Leshev Ba'Sukkah*, eating and dwelling in the *Sukkah*, people are encouraged to bring their meals from the outside into our *sukkah*. These meals must be dairy or *pareve* and may not be brought into the synagogue kitchen. Synagogue utensils may not be used with these meals.

“Baal Tashchit: Beware lest you destroy”

We follow in our consumption the principles of *Baal Tashchit*, moderation and the avoidance of unnecessary waste. In that spirit we add the following guidelines to our Kashruth policy:

If possible, non-disposable dishes and silverware should be used. Please refrain from using styrofoam and other non-recyclable goods.

Families should arrange for the donation and pick up of left over food to food banks such as City Harvest.

Local or organic produce, and bulk packaged foods, should be used when kosher and available.

When sponsoring any *Kiddush*, meal, or affair consider a donation of three per cent of your food costs to Mazon, a Jewish organization which combats hunger.

“Hochei'ach Tochi'ach: The Honest Rebuke”

In the verses just before the Golden Rule, “Love your Neighbor as Yourself” (Leviticus 19:16-17), the Torah gives two other *mitzvot*: 1) Don't hate your fellow in your heart, but honestly rebuke him and 2) Don't go gossip mongering among your people.

Hochei'ach Tochi'ach, “the Honest Rebuke” as later defined by the Rabbis, requires that we correct someone whom we believe to be sinning in a way which is tender, direct, and motivated by a desire to help and improve him/her, not to gratify our own egos or assert our own superiority. The mitzvah against gossip mongering prohibits our carelessly sharing negative information about another, even if it is true.

If you believe that someone is misusing the kitchen, or comprising its Kashruth, make every effort to tell him or her caringly and constructively. Also tell the Rabbi so that the Kashruth matter may be resolved.

If you hear someone spreading information about another's misuse of the kitchen, encourage him or her to tell that party directly. Also, make sure that the Rabbi is informed.

In these ways, we will protect both the Kashruth of our kitchen and the dignity and reputation of our members.

Rabbi gets set for her new hurdle

By ROBERT FLEMING

Daily News Staff Writer

As one of the first group of women to be ordained as Conservative rabbis, Debra Cantor sees her new post as rabbi of Brooklyn's oldest synagogue as her biggest challenge yet.

Bolstered by a deep, abiding faith in Judaism and traditional Jewish religious teachings, Cantor, 33, disregarded the advice of family and friends that she join the more liberal Reform Judaism and Reconstructionist movement. Instead, she opted to follow a more difficult path to become the first woman to serve as rabbi of the Conservative synagogue, Congregation Beth Israel Anshei Emes, at 10 Clinton St. in Cobble Hill.

"I'm a Conservative Jew and I had to be true to myself," said Cantor yesterday. "There are only eight female rabbis in the Conservative movement. It's not traditional for women to serve as rabbis, so my appointment is significant."

Cantor assumed her position at the synagogue last week. Organized in 1836, the synagogue has 427 members and a history of community involvement which Cantor said she hopes to continue.

"The fact that I didn't always feel accepted in the synagogue has sensitized me to the plight of others who have struggled to be a part of the Conservative community," she added.



OLDEST CONGREGATION, NEWEST RABBI: Debra Cantor of Beth Israel Anshei Emes.

ANTHONY PISCATORE/DAILY NEWS

"I had to struggle so hard to go to rabbinical school. I know there are differences between men and women; but I don't know how those will play themselves out in my new role."

It was a hard battle for Cantor to achieve her goal. She was graduated from Brandeis University *cum laude* in 1977 with a major in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies. Her rabbinical studies were completed last May at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York.

There is life outside of the synagogue. Cantor has been married for six years to James Beede, an officer of the Chase Manhattan Bank. She said her husband has been "extremely supportive" through all of her travails.

"I don't think the people will view me as the traditional type of rabbi," Cantor concluded. "Maybe this will end up as being quite positive. I want to reach out to everyone. I want to emphasize the strength of our religious community and give everyone a greater sense of caring."

L. J. MOSS DIES; LEE UNITED SYNAGOGUE

President From 1931 to 1944
Was a Specialist in Real
Estate and Trust Law

Louis J. Moss, president of the United Synagogue of America from 1931 to 1944, died yesterday in his home at 319 St. John's Place, Brooklyn, after a long illness. His age was 64.

A lawyer specializing in real estate and trust law, Mr. Moss had been a member of the Brooklyn firm of Moss & Merrell from 1921 until two years ago, when he set up an independent office.

He had served on the executive committees of the American Jewish Committee and the Jewish Education Committee of New York, as president of the Brooklyn Region, Zionist Organization of America, and as a vice president of the Brooklyn Jewish Community Council.

Mr. Moss also had been a member of the administrative committees of the United Palestine Appeal and the Synagogue Council of America. He had served on the executive board of the National Conference of Christians and Jews and as a member of the executive committee of the Temple of Religion, New York World's Fair, 1939-40.

Born in Hungary, the son of Michael and Jennie Friedman Moss, he was brought to the United States at the age of 3. Mr. Moss received an A. B. degree from City College in 1903 and an LL. B. degree from St. Lawrence University in 1907.

A member of a draft board during the first World War, he was on the legal advisory board under the Selective Service Act during the recent conflict. Mr. Moss was a trustee of Congregation Baith Israel of Brooklyn.

Surviving are his widow, the former Bryna Finegold; a son, Henry; two daughters, Miss Judith Moss and Mrs. Esther Jamieson; a sister, Mrs. Bertha Friedman, and a grandson.



LOUIS J. MOSS

Windsor

Making Kane Street Accessible to All

See Issue 11, Mid-20th Century Leaders, for full text to Rabbi Schleindlin's article.



From Generation to Generation • January 2002 Number 3

L'DOR VADOR

Making Kane Street Accessible to All

By Mickey Green
and Rob Stulberg

As many of you know, one of our children, Joey Stulberg, gets around in a wheelchair. That circumstance has helped us to appreciate the many barriers that disabled people face, and the importance of removing those



barriers. The equation is simple: when their way is blocked, disabled people cannot participate; when their way is opened, they can.

Because our Synagogue and religious school are housed in buildings constructed long ago, they provide only limited access to disabled people, including many elderly congregants and guests. Although an asphalt ramp in the courtyard allows people who use wheelchairs or walkers to

reach the Sanctuary and the Community Room via the kitchen; the second floor of the school building, the bathroom facilities and the *bimah* are inaccessible to the mobility-impaired.

Our renewal plan addresses these concerns. A new entranceway, to be constructed at the front of the courtyard, will be ramped. That entranceway will provide easy access to both the

Sanctuary and the Community Room. An elevator in the school building will enable everyone to reach the second floor and the newly-constructed third floor of that structure. Our

architects are working with the Renewal and the Ritual Committees to provide a plan for dignified access to the *bimah*.

These improvements will allow our congregation to better serve the disabled. They also will help us, in a

direct and immediate way, to "heal the world" by opening our doors a bit wider.

From Generation to Generation:

A Historical View from Rabbi Ray Scheindlin

Ed. note: Since 1983 Rabbi Scheindlin has returned to Kane Street annually to continue serving as our cantor for High Holiday services.

Reading about the Renewal project in the Campaign newsletters has made me nostalgic—not only for the years when I was active in the shul (1974-83), but for the dim earlier period known in detail only to shul historians like Judy Greenwald (who kindly supplied me with some of the data in this piece).

I can conjure up only a few highlights: the merging of Congregation Baith Israel with Talmud Torah Anshei Emes that yielded our barely-wieldy official name; the presidency of Aaron Copland's father, 1907-09; and the glory years presided over by Rabbi Goldfarb, who served our predecessors from 1905 to 1959. His years were the years when the shul was full; a family I

know of, arriving in the neighborhood in the 1920s, was offered the last two seats, at the



back of the balcony. I know that there was a time when, if the shul was short one man for a minyan, someone would run to the police precinct, which would provide a Jewish officer.

I also know that after World War II, and after the death of Rabbi Goldfarb, there was a long period of decline, during which Rabbi Henry Michelman, Rabbi Goldfarb's grandson, served as part-time rabbi and Jack Hertz as permanent and final president presumptive. Henry told me once that all he did at Kane Street was to

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EXTRA! EXTRA!

December 27: As *L'Dor VaDor* goes to print, we are pleased to report the Capital Campaign has now raised a total of **\$1,716,525.**

Please see page 5 for more details.

Are There Any Converts in the House?

by Timothy J. Rucinski

Tim Rucinski has lived in Brooklyn with his wife Trudy Steinfeld for over twenty-six years. Although exposed to Jewish customs and practices throughout his married life, Tim became acquainted with Kane Street during the preparation for his daughter Leah's bat mitzvah and attributes this life event as the trigger that led him to embrace Judaism. Following nine months of preparation with Rabbi Weintraub, studying prayer book Hebrew and works by Heschel, Soloveitchik, Buber and Rosensweig, Tim converted to Judaism in the fall of 2002. He is currently working on a novel that explores racism and anti-Semitism.

It had been years since I had seen my best friend from childhood, Swampy McCoo. We met at the Hill Diner on Court Street, sitting in the back where it was quiet. I ordered a glass of wine, he had a beer. Some things never change.

"You wear your beer well," I said with a smile.

Swampy sipped from the tall glass, then eased back in his chair, laughing, and rubbed his extended belly. We exchanged the usual pleasantries and then he asked the question that I had been waiting for: "So what's the biggest thing on your end?"

I didn't have to think long, although I had wondered how he would receive the unexpected news.

"Well," I answered rather nonchalantly, "I converted to Judaism a few years back."

For a moment he said nothing, just staring at me wide eyed.

"You?" he asked as I sipped my wine.

"Yes."

"Mr. Altar Boy?"

"Yes."

"Mr. never miss Mass on Sunday?"

"Yes."

"That's hard to believe."

"Better believe it."

He paused for a moment then took another swallow of beer.

"So you switched teams," he continued.

"Yes."

"You've gone from wondering 'what would Jesus do' to 'what would Groucho do?'"

I laughed. "Very funny."

"Of course it's funny."

"But you could have said Moses"

"Huh?"

"You could have asked, 'What would Moses do?'"

"Yeah, but that's not funny."

"I guess not."

"Moses wasn't a funny guy."

"You seem so sure," I said. "I didn't know you were a biblical scholar?"

"Did you ever come across anyplace where Moses told a joke?"

"Not that I can recall."

"I've seen the movie. You've seen the movie. I sat in the theater for four hours waiting for Charlton Heston to at least crack a smile. Nothing. I left the theater wondering if the Hebrews and the Jews were the same people. Confused the hell out of me. I needed to get a dose of the Marx Brothers and The Three Stooges to remind me that Jews were funny."

"Don't forget Henny Youngman."

Swampy laughed, recalling an earlier time. "Remember when we saw Henny Youngman at the Bottom Line?" he asked

I remember."

"He was no Moses. But he had a decent following and he was a lot funnier."

I knew he was stalling. Swampy always dealt with serious issues by making light of them first. He drained his beer and ordered another. I was only two sips into a nice Israeli Chardonnay.

"So?" he asked, finally ready to talk.

"So what?"

"So why did you jump ship from the church?"

"That's a long story."

"Maybe later then."

"Maybe later."

Swampy sat quietly for a while, unusual for him as the waitress brought him a fresh glass.

"I took you by surprise," I said.

"Little bit."

"You upset?"

"Nah! If you made this decision I'm sure it was best for you."

"It was."

He paused for a moment then asked, "What do you have to do to convert?"

"Aside from learning Hebrew and studying up on the rites and practices and history?"

"You mean there's more?"

"Well, you meet with a trio of rabbis, present your reasons for wanting to convert, pray together, meet with a moyel. . ."

"A what?"

"A moyel. He's the guy that does the circumcising."

"You don't mean to say . . ."

"Don't worry. Nothing much happens there."

"You had me worried for a moment," he said, relieved. "That's it?"

“And a dunk in the mikvah tank.”

“Which is?”

“The ritual cleansing pool.”

Swampy sipped his beer. “And then after this mikvah thing, you’re off to pray for the day or something?”

“No. You follow up the mikvah with another few prayers then it’s off to breakfast.”

“By yourself?”

“No. With my wife. And with our friend Amy Strauss who strolled into the diner exclaiming, “I just got off the phone with Jerusalem. They’re dancing in the streets – ‘We got another one!’”

Swampy laughed. “What about getting started? I mean, you changed the way that you look at everything.”

“It’s more that I’ve put things into a clearer perspective. I have no hard feelings to the way I worshipped in my former life, nor to those that continue to do so.”

“I assume that there is a lot of studying involved with this.”

“You have to meet with the Rabbi and talk things through then study quite a bit to bring yourself up to speed.”

“Sounds like going back to school. I couldn’t handle it.”

“I was lucky, though. Since my wife and her family is Jewish, I had done a lot of hands-on training.”

“Made your own matzo ball soup, did you?”

“Very funny.”

“I thought so.”

“In the beginning,” I said.

“Good choice of words.”

“In the beginning, I would come to synagogue and get there pretty early. You know what a minyan is?”

“Should I?”

“Probably not.”

“Okay. I don’t.”

“A minyan is a group of ten worshippers that need to be present before certain prayers can be said. If there’s less than ten, then you have to wait for the tenth person to come before continuing.”

“You just wait?”

“Yes.”

“And nothing happens?”

“Well, sometimes someone runs across the street and knocks on Mike Shelanski’s door to ask him to pop over for a bit.”

“That works.”

“When Mike answers.”

“Does he always answer?”

"Only when he's home."

"So what's the point?"

"So when you're not Jewish you don't count. Let me rephrase that. You're not a part of the 'family,' I guess is a good way to put it. And when I was preparing for conversion, I'd sit in the pew and the service would stop because we needed a tenth person. Most people didn't know that I wasn't legal yet. Someone would yell up to the Rabbi, "We have ten," and he would say that we didn't and everyone would say that we did and he'd say we didn't and they'd argue and I'd sit there like a fool trying not to tip my hat that I didn't as yet have my union card, until someone would wander in."

"That's uncomfortable."

"Oh yes," I agreed. "That was definitely uncomfortable."

He paused then added, "Where do you go?"

"Excuse me?"

"The synagogue."

"Oh. Kane Street. Across the street and around the corner."

"That's convenient."

"Very."

"It's a good place?"

"Yes."

"They like having you there? I mean, you weren't born into the 'family' so to speak. It's more like you were adopted."

"Yeah, they're good people. You know, sometimes a few have looked at me with a cautious eye. I think that they knew I was a convert and I got a vibe or two that they weren't pleased that I was in the house. But that's rare. And maybe that's just my paranoia creeping through being new kid on the block. Overall, it's really quite wonderful."

"Welcomed with open arms, were you?"

"Literally and figuratively. The day after the official conversion I had an opportunity to offer an aliyah, that's a blessing before the Torah reading that calls everyone to attention, and it was announced by the Rabbi to the entire congregation that I had just converted. Lots of singing and hand clapping and smiling faces all around. Pretty exciting. Then when walking back to my wife and daughter in the pew a few people came out to the aisle and offered congratulations. And afterwards, people were very supportive."

"That's cool."

"Yeah. It was. Very cool. In a very short moment of time I felt that I had become part of something remarkably special in a place that wanted to have me. That had been missing from my life for a very long time."

"Are there many converts at Kane Street?"

"Sure," I said, laughing. "The place is crawling with them. Some that you know are converts, others that you would never know. Converts make up just a small part of this congregation, a community that embraces any and all that pass through its doors. And from all walks of life and beliefs. There are those that lean toward the more orthodox customs and those that are more liberal. There are men and women, couples, gay couples, people of color, lots of young couples, and quite a number of children."

"Always good to see the kids. It's the children that give you signs of hope."

"Absolutely."

"So," Swampy continued raising his glass. "Here's to you and your new faith."

I raised my glass to him and we drank. "It's faith all right," I added. "Certainly, It's a sense of community linked by spiritual faith. But it's also a community linked socially. Culturally as well. And with such a diverse body of congregants. It's a good place to be."

"Sounds like pluralism is alive and well."

"Good way to put it. You know, for years Jews weren't able to recruit new members. Politics, you know."

"The kind that would get you killed?"

"Precisely. Yet, in the prayer book there's a daily petition to the Creator to watch over those that convert to the faith."

"You need watching over?"

"Everyone needs watching over."

"Me too?"

"Especially you."

Swampy laughed. "Any one thing that proved that you had arrived?" he asked. "I mean, after you had gotten your feet wet, anything happen to show you that you had found your home?"

"There are a few."

"One will do."

I thought for a moment then said, "There was one Shabbat evening, that's Friday night . . ."

"I know what it is," he said, interrupting. "I'm not a total idiot."

"Anyway, that night I went by myself to shul. The family was elsewhere. I was home with the dog."

"Lenny?"

"Yeah. Lenny the Westie."

"Where did you come up with that name?"

"Does it matter?"

"Not really."

"Didn't think so."

"You're getting off track."

"You're leading me away."

"Forgive me."

"With pleasure," I took a sip of wine then went on. "Anyway, I was speaking afterwards with Danny Magill, the president of the congregation at the time, and Danny, very warmly mind you, invited me to Shabbat dinner at his home knowing that I was alone."

"That's very nice."

"Yes. It was."

"And how was it?"

"What?"

"Dinner."

"I didn't go."

"What do you mean you didn't go?"

"I had to take care of the dog."

"You're a wimp."

"Absolutely. I certainly am. I was taken aback by the gesture so much that I neglected to accept the invitation. I kicked myself walking home."

"Hard, I hope."

"Oh yeah."

"But that was the big thing?"

"That was one of them. Knowing that I had been approached and welcomed by someone that had been a part of the community for a very long time, respected by fellow congregants, certainly respected by me. Although I had known that I had made the right decision in converting and doing so at Kane Street, that evening the light bulb flashed on and I knew that everything in my world was right where it needed to be. It was a good feeling. And it's the kind of feeling that's reinforced every day by the rabbi and the members of Kane Street."

"Do you know the other converts? I mean, do you have your own little club in the congregation?"

"The convert club?"

"Yeah."

"Absolutely not. We're all part of Kane Street and that's what matters. I know many converts at Kane Street. Some are quiet about it and others wear it proudly on their sleeves. Many convert because they marry into a Jewish family. Others, like me, are on a journey and looking for a better way to live a life that amounts to more than a hill of beans in this crazy world."

"Thanks Bogie."

Swampy swallowed the rest of his beer then said, "Why don't we take a walk so that you can show me this new place of yours?"

"Sure," I answered. "I can show you the building. But converting to Judaism is more than just bricks and mortar. It's a roadmap to follow from this point until the last point. You don't really need a building to do that."

"But it helps," he said. "I mean, you don't want to go chanting in the middle of the street."

"Oh, yeah," I laughed. "It helps."

I paid for the wine and beer and Swampy and I took a short walk so that I could show him the place where faith and pluralism were alive and well.