

Ep #11: Memoirs



Full Episode Transcript

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Hebrew College

Ep #11: Memoirs

Welcome to *Speaking Torah*. I'm your host Rabbi Jeffrey Summit, Director of the Innovation Lab at Hebrew College. In this podcast, leaders from Jewish communities around the country read essays by Hebrew College Rabbis and leaders. These essays tackle the pressing issues of our world that's so in need of healing and hope, and they do so with Hebrew College's signature compassion, creativity, and relevancy.

As Hebrew College celebrates its centennial, we remember and tell stories from the past, not only with the joy of marking 100 years of accomplishment, but with the commitment to renew and reimagine our present and our future.

In part one of this episode, we'll hear a piece entitled *Shemot* by Hebrew College Rabbi Shayna Rhodes, read by Hebrew College Professor Dr. Judith Kates, Shayna's former teacher and current *hevruta* partner.

In part two, we hear Hebrew College 2010 alumnus and current Dean of Students Rabbi Daniel Klein's memory piece about his experience as a student at Prozdor, read by former Prozdor and Yavneh Director Margie Berkowitz.

And in part three, we hear a memoir about lasting Hebrew Teachers College friendships, written by Prozdor and Yavneh alumnus and UCLA Professor Emeritus Arnold Band, read by Hebrew College Rector Rabbi Arthur Green.

You can find detailed bios of all our readers and writers on the *Speaking Torah* podcast website at hebrewcollege.edu/podcast. Now, here's Dr. Judith Kates reading Rabbi Shayna Rhodes' piece, *Shemot*.

Dr. Judith Kates: My names have always been Janet and Shayna. From kindergarten through twelfth grade at Bais Yaakov, an ultra-orthodox day school, I was Shayna all morning during religious studies and Janet all afternoon during secular studies. Now that I was going to become a rabbi, which name should come to the foreground and which to the background?

Ep #11: Memoirs

Rabbi Janet did not sound right. Rabbi Shayna? That was better, but would it ever ring true? Authenticity in new approaches, new ideas, new concepts – how was it to be found? As a woman rabbi, I myself was an innovation. Would I ever really feel authentic? My mind accepted it... theoretically... almost immediately. My heart and soul took longer.

The question of authenticity has no easy solution. A few days ago, my daughter, Yael, asked me to create a ritual that would welcome a baby girl into the Jewish community in a way that would be as meaningful as a bris. She and her wife, Anna, had noticed that somehow the energy, the experience of welcoming baby girls, did not have the same power as that of welcoming baby boys.

Of all the shalom bat ceremonies they had been to, none moved those present in the way that *brit milah*, a ceremony thousands of years old, did. Perhaps that elusive authenticity is the price one pays for pioneering new ground. And when one starts moving away from tradition, for even the most compelling reasons, where does one stop? How does one blend tradition and innovation?

Can, for example, a woman perform a circumcision? The first time I saw a *mohelet*, that question popped, unbidden, to my mind. Tziphora, of course, performed a circumcision. Or did she? We read in the book of *Shemot* that as Tziphora and Moshe made their way to Egypt, Moshe is suddenly attacked by God. Tziphora takes a flint, cuts off her son's foreskin, and touches his legs with it, saying, "You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me!"

The *Gemara* states: and is there anyone who says that a woman may not perform circumcision? But is it not written: "Then Tziphora took a flint and cut off the foreskin of her son" (*Shemot* 4:25)? This verse explicitly states that a circumcision was performed by a woman!

One should read into the verse: and she caused to be taken, that is, she did not take a flint herself. But is it not written: "And she cut off"? Read into

Ep #11: Memoirs

the verse: and she caused to be cut off, as she told another person to take a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and he did so. (b. *Avodah Zarah* 27a)

The scene in *Shemot* is shrouded in mystery. What is happening? Why is God attacking Moshe? How does Tzipora know what to do? Whose legs does she touch and what do her mysterious words mean? There are so many unknowns. What is absolutely clear is that Tzipora is doing the circumcising. Despite this, in a tradition that frequently disempowers women, the flint is taken from Tzipora's hand and put into the hand of a heretofore unmentioned, unknown, male person.

I watched the *mohelet*, a practicing surgeon, pick up the blade and without hesitation perform a flawless circumcision. "May I take photographs," someone had asked "or will that distract you?"

"When I am holding a knife," she answered quite calmly, "nothing distracts me." Upon completion of her task, she picked up the baby and showed the beautiful boy to everyone in the room. "Yes," my mind answered, "a woman may perform a circumcision."

Rabbi Jeffrey Summit: What did you like about this piece, and any thoughts on her play on words with the title *Shemot*, which means names in Hebrew, and is the Hebrew name for The Book of Exodus?

Dr. Judith Kates: One of the things that seemed to me so characteristic of Rabbi Shayna Rhodes is that her language, so smoothly, incorporates both Hebrew language itself but also terms and ideas and concepts from especially classical sources, both the Tanakh, Bible, and Talmud.

And of course, for me, as I remember her in the very first class of Rabbinical students at Hebrew College, one of the things that has brought her to embark on this path of studying to become a Rabbi, in essence in midlife, was her intense desire to study Talmud.

She wanted, really wanted to be an insider in that world of Rabbinic tradition, which she had, of course, been brought up in. As she mentions in

Ep #11: Memoirs

her piece, she went for 12 years to Bais Yaakov, which is this *yeshiva*, ultra-orthodox day school for girls. And she often talked about the fact that she wasn't allowed to actually study the texts themselves.

She was always only allowed to study excerpts or summaries. And there was a real passion in her, which I think manifests itself in the fact that the way she now talks about herself, about her own experience, about her thinking, it's just imbued with Rabbinic ways of thinking and language.

What I noticed for instance, that in this sentence where she's asking about authenticity, she said, "Authenticity and new approaches, new ideas, new concepts..." she's totally involved with new concepts, new ideas, the whole question of authenticity, which really comes from a more philosophical, modern point of view.

She asks then, "How was it to be found?" Which I hear an echo there of the famous phrase; *Eishet Chail mi yimtza*, a woman of resources, a woman of valor, who can find, or how can it be found? So, she's actually, in a very subtle way, alluding to a Biblical text in asking her question about a very modern experience, which is, of course, her own experience.

That's just a small example. But throughout the piece, when she wants to ask a question about whether or not it's permitted for a woman to perform a circumcision, which is in the language of *halacha*, which is very much her language. And the very first thing that happens is she slides right away into talking about the Biblical text, where we have this truly mysterious little episode about Moshe's wife Tzipora performing, it seems, a circumcision on her own son. And Shayna is right there, asking the questions that actually thousands of years of commentators have asked.

And she has a kind of clarity of mind and an independence of mind. She wants to say, "Look, it's quite clear. We have all these words there, we have clear statement in the Bible. And yet, look what the Rabbis are doing in the *Gemara*, which she's very respectful of, and at the same time, she characterizes it in a quite critical way.

Ep #11: Memoirs

What's happening here? Women are – a woman is being, as it were, quote, “disempowered.” She notices those things, not in a tone of anger, but in a tone of dismay. And that also seems, to me, really characteristic of her and one of the things that I've always appreciated and respected about her. She cares deeply about tradition. It's really at the core of her life and what she most believes in and cares about. And at the same time, she has this remarkable independence of mind, which I think comes through in this piece.

The other thing about her way of talking here that I really just enormously respect is so much modesty. You know, when somebody writes a memoir piece, often that letter, “I,” shows up all the time. There's a famous passage in Virginia Wolf's *A Room of One's Own* where she is characterizing certain kinds of men's writing where she says, “The page is sprinkled with the capital letter I.”

And with Shayna, the first thing that happens when she's talking about her own questioning about authenticity is that she goes to her daughter's question and the wanting to pay attention to how to make a meaningful shalom bat ceremony. It's almost by the way that you might notice that her daughter is asking her to create a ritual. Which is actually a rather remarkable thing for even a woman rabbi to do, and that her daughter trusts her and respects her capacity to do such a thing.

She doesn't say any of that. She just puts it in terms of the general problem. And then, she moves into this discussion about the biblical and talmudic texts, with which she is completely comfortable.

And at the end, she makes our focus be on the *mohelet*, the woman who is performing the role of ritual circumciser. I think her description of this woman, who does the flawless circumcision, who is so calm, who has the capacity to put together her medical ability with a respect for the community, which is conveyed in this picking up the baby and showing what Shayna then describes as a beautiful boy to everyone who's there, that's Shayna.

Ep #11: Memoirs

That's who she is. That's what she's constantly doing, both as a teacher and as a Rabbi for communities. And yet, she doesn't talk about herself. She talks about this other person whom she observed.

So, I really was very taken by the way she chose to write this memoir, because it really speaks in her voice and conveys who she is in this very modest way.

Rabbi Jeffrey Summit: Now we'll hear Margie Berkowitz reading Rabbi Daniel Klein's short memoir about Hebrew College Prozdor.

Margie Berkowitz: I like to joke that what I learned at Prozdor is how to skip class. This is, of course, a myth that does not reflect the fullness of my Prozdor experience.

I went to class a lot more than I missed it and learned much about Jewish history, culture and tradition as well as Hebrew. In other words, the opposite of my rebellious myth. Virtues of dedication, perseverance, and service were probably as true to my experience.

However, what I remember most vividly about Prozdor is feeling a sense of transgressive freedom despite or within the obligation. My older brother initiated me into this. Every Tuesday, we would take the T from Newton to Brookline and walk up the hill from the Longwood stop to Hawes Street and the Hebrew College mansion.

That journey alone nurtured a sense of independence, but was then comically enhanced by our attempts to elude the watchful eye of the train conductor. Though we came from a home in which we were not wealthy but never lacked for anything and certainly had plenty of money to pay for the T on a weekly basis, we often did not bring enough change to pay full fare.

Maybe it was an oversight at times, but more likely it was a conscious act of rebellion that always scared and excited me, to see how little we could pay, while still making it look like we had paid the full fare, so we would not get caught.

Ep #11: Memoirs

The minor transgressions continued at Prozdor with what we thought of as well-timed, judiciously deployed trips to Dunkin Donuts instead of class. It was almost always with a friend, probably to avoid a quiz or just some class that we thought was less important or pressing than a donut and a conversation.

We were hardly delinquents. We attended class regularly, participated, even enjoyed ourselves now and again, but we also experimented with the boundaries of engagement and rejection, of reverence and irreverence.

This was behavior, at least for me, that was barely thinkable at “real” school. I was an overachieving student who bought into my suburban educational experience of learning for the sake of grades, and to get into a good college.

These are of course worthy goals, but for me, they were too energized by fear of failure, of disappointing others, ultimately of my own inner hollowness. I always knew that something was off in my fidelity to these ambitions. This dissonance came out in a love of Jack Kerouac, Beat Poetry and the Grateful Dead. And it came out in my mildly norm-defying behavior at Prozdor.

Though the experience was as much about participating in and going along with the given parameters presented to me, Prozdor was also about breaking free and trying to center life around things that really mattered.

And crucially, I think I sensed in Prozdor and by extension in Jewish life, a little more pliability, openness, and genuineness. A willingness to tolerate and maybe even desire and invite some irreverence, particularly from those who were also reverent.

It was as if Prozdor and Jewish tradition were winking at me, subtly, slyly calling to a deeper, more essential part of me, even challenging me not just to be a passive receiver of the experience, Jewish tradition, and my life.

Rabbi Jeffrey Summit: Was there a part in these essays that spoke to you?

Ep #11: Memoirs

Margie Berkowitz: I was almost two generations before Daniel. Prozdor became my life, and it started on a spring afternoon in 1956 when I arrived at Hebrew School at Temple Emeth in South Brookline. And the principal, Mr. Klein, announced we were going on a field trip.

It was my graduating year of Hebrew School. We were all shocked. We'd never gone on a field trip. We loaded onto a bus, about 12 of us. And we went to Brookline and pulled up in front of this magnificent Victorian mansion.

We all went in. If he had explained it, I don't remember. But I walked in and I was in a state of shock. The most beautiful bridal marble staircase on my left, and all these incredible teenagers moving up and down in the halls in front of me. That was my beginning at Prozdor.

After that day, touring, meeting kids, smelling the Jewish cooking in the basement kitchen, I went home that night and told my mom, "Mr. Klein took us some place in Brookline today. I don't know where it was, but I know I want to go there."

So, my mom, being the greatest Jewish mom ever, called Mr. Klein the next morning and said, "Where did you take Margie yesterday?" And he said, "Oh, it's a place called Hebrew Teachers College with a high school called Prozdor."

So, she said, "Well, she'd like to go." And he said, "No way. She would never pass the entrance exam. Kids study for that for a year." And she said, "Well, what does she need to do to pass the entrance exam?" Clearly not even thinking, "What is this place?"

And he told her, on a whim, "Well, you'd have to sign her up for Camp Yavneh. And that's the camp where they study most of the day. And then they'll prepare her for the exam."

So, she told me, we made a decision, and two months later, I was at Camp Yavneh in Northwood New Hampshire at age 12. And I began that summer

Ep #11: Memoirs

studying all morning, and then an additional hour every day preparing for the entrance exam. I met boys and girls that would be friends for life. And my first night in the *Chadar Ochel*, in the dining room, I cast my eye across the large room and I saw a boy leaning back on his bench against the wall.

And I said to myself, “That is the handsomest boy I’ve ever seen.” It was Stan Berkowitz, who would much later in life become my husband. I went back and I took the exam. Passing was 60. I got a 62 and was assigned to *Kitah Aleph/Gimmel* and I began the rest of my journey.

Rabbi Jeffrey Summit: Did you see any similarities in Daniel’s and your experience?

Margie Berkowitz: Definitely. He’s telling us that he transitioned from the one world to the next. The story of the T rang true for me, since I took it as well many times. And there were always Prozdor kids getting off at that stop and coming up.

So, you come into a world that I always thought – what he calls the mansion, we just call the building. It created an environment of richness. It had been a multimillionaire’s mansion. And it was like giving the students *kavod*. We were honored to be there. So, he touches on that.

The other piece that I think would – and I asked my kids who are all Prozdor – we all felt a little bit rebellious being there, doing things like he says. It was the kind of stretching you couldn’t do in the secular school environment.

He stretched his boundaries and he was introduced to a living Judaism through text, through Hebrew, and through being with other kids. You know, I used to say that I had to miss – my friends were watching American Bandstand in somebody’s house when I was there. And I think that’s the theme that unites our two pieces, that we studied, we definitely learned despite ourselves.

Ep #11: Memoirs

I think it's interesting, knowing Daniel, the business with the T and the conductor and the change. It's kind of like, "I'm going to do a little naughty thing." And of course, each in our own way, we've come back to Hebrew College, to a different Hebrew College, but those years – and he's not mentioning Yavneh. I barely mentioned Yavneh.

But Yavneh was the extension of Prozdor, so it was a 12-month experience for all of us. And ironically, my son Jonathan, my youngest, was Daniel's counsellor. So, we overlap in that way.

All in all, we knew we were doing something special. And some of that is what I try to bring to the Prozdor that I've created as director, 40 years later after the first story.

Rabbi Jeffrey Summit: Daniel, why did you decide to write about Prozdor?

Rabbi Daniel Klein: I Have this somewhat unique experience of having been affiliated with Hebrew College now since I was a kid. I mean, I started at Camp Yavneh when I was 12, and shortly thereafter went to Prozdor. And the truth is, in addition to my own personal experience, my close relatives were also campers there.

But not only that; my aunt and uncle and close family friends went there. So, it sort of feels like participating in a generational experience, being a part of Hebrew College for me. So, Hebrew College, in that way, feels like it has been – not just feels like – has been intertwined with part of my life, not forever, but for a long time.

And well, in some ways forever in the sense that it predates me as well. I sort of inherited, in addition to it being a formative experience in my own life, I also inherited it as part of my family and circle of friends. So, writing about it, when I had the opportunity, for the centennial volume, to write about my connection to Hebrew College, it was a real gift. There was a real sense of taking time to appreciate the way in which Hebrew College has been a part of my life, influencing my life in a really dramatic way for decades and beyond.

Ep #11: Memoirs

When I think the Jewish experience can participate in the learning, ritual life, and communal experience, when it can in particular be something that is done with friends in a social way. I mean, it is so much – I think for a lot of people, it has a higher likelihood of being a powerful experience.

I mean, if anything, probably what's guiding me right now – my wife and I, what's guiding us is yes, we want our children to learn. And that's a critical part of belonging. But really, the goal is we want them to feel like they belong, that they're a part of this thing, that they're a part of this tradition, that they're a part of this people.

So, figuring out ways to make it sort of organically a part of their lives, particularly in a communal way, I think that's what I experienced. I think that's what I was writing about in a lot of ways, the way in which Jewish life was just infused in my reality.

In my own experience professionally here at Hebrew College, I've come to appreciate how I think my deep love and sense of fulfillment in the work is a combination of my role, the people I'm working with, and the mission or the project. In some ways, thinking about my experience at Prozdor and at Camp Yavneh, in some ways it's similar.

I felt like I was a part of something that I really believed in, that I loved. And I offered something. I was valued. I was appreciated. That was particularly true at camp where, sort of, a full lived experience, and Prozdor also participated in that because there was this sense of, "Yeah, we're doing something together and this is really important and we believe in it, and we're glad we're all a part of it."

Rabbi Jeffrey Summit: Do you have a message for teens?

Rabbi Daniel Klein: I think what I want to say to teenagers is, we need you. The Jewish people need you. The world needs you. I encourage you to try to be open to the possibility that Jewish life could be actually something valuable and meaningful in your life, both as a recipient of it and as something to give and contribute to.

Ep #11: Memoirs

Rabbi Jeffrey Summit: Our last memoir is by Professor Arnold Band, who was a Prozdor student and Yavneh Camper in the 1950s, and went on to be a distinguished professor at UCLA and leader in the field of Jewish Studies.

Hebrew College Rector Rabbi Arthur Green, who was once his student when Brand taught at Brandeis, will read an excerpt from Band's essay: "Four Men Entered an Orchard."

Rabbi Arthur Green: Sometime in the fall of 1953, four young men were ushered into the office of Eisig Silberschlag, then President of the Boston Hebrew College in Brookline, Massachusetts. These four were Walter Ackerman, David Weinstein, Arnold Band, and Yitshak Twersky.

We were congratulated for being the first group of American-born and trained instructors to teach at Hebrew College – then Hebrew Teachers College, of course – whose instructors since its founding in 1921 had been European-born and trained.

In his usual mildly ironic tone, Silberschlag evoked the famous midrash of the four great tannaim who entered the orchard, meaning here the orchard of Torah learning. We realized, of course, that we were not the equals of these famed scholars, yet appreciated the literary reference. I write these words as the last living member of this group, 66 years after the event.

Often, when we met, we reminisced about that moment. We discussed that period and increasingly became aware that our meeting with Silberschlag, as important as it was in the life of Hebrew College, really lacked historical depth.

After all, we were still in the first decade of the two events that have shaped Jewish life since then: the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel. These two events and their implications were not part of the discussion that day, or, for that matter in the academic life of the college.

Ep #11: Memoirs

It wasn't as if we had no meaningful Jewish associations outside the college. Ackerman and Weinstein had already served in the American army while Twersky and I, somewhat younger, were active in Zionist groups not affiliated with Hebrew College.

We never really discussed the ideological underpinnings of the "Hebraism" of the Hebrew College, either its origins or its implications. We were, of course aware of the development of modern Hebrew since the middle of the 19th century. We read with reverence Bialik and Mendele and Agnon among many other modern writers.

But we knew little of the tarbut movement which emerged in Poland and Lithuania in 1921, how its ideology differed from that of the speakers of Yiddish, with which most of our parents had some familiarity. In general, for most English-speakers, the term Hebrew was an interesting substitute for the term Jewish.

It was simply more dignified, suggesting some vague connection with the Christian world of the general population; we were the Hebrews. For most Jewish families, however, Hebrew language learning was a problematic experience reserved for boys who had to be prepared for their bar mitzvahs, after which they would abandon their Hebrew studies and turn to other passions of adolescence. The Hebraism the four of us embraced at Hebrew College, by contrast, was clearly meaningful to us and shaped our careers.

Of my three Hebrew College colleagues, Walter Ackerman, "Ackie," was the closest and maintained with me the longest, most intense friendship. I first met him in 1949 when he returned from his army service in Europe and resumed his studies both at the Hebrew College and Harvard.

A listing of Ackie's activities and biography spans 8 pages of a Google search, and is overwhelming in its array of teaching positions in both Los Angeles and Beer Sheva; a variety of administrative projects in both Jewish and general education in the United States and Israel.

Ep #11: Memoirs

He served as Director both at Camp Yavneh of Boston Hebrew College and at Ramah Camps in California and Canada, as Dean of the University of Judaism, as Chairman of the Department of Education at Ben Gurion University, and as Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Ben Gurion.

When you add to these positions an impressive publication record – over 80 articles and two books – and his service on dozens of committees, you must come to the conclusion that Ackie was one of most formidable figures in Jewish education in the second half of the twentieth century.

My friendship with David Weinstein, or “Doch,” began at the waterfront at Camp Yavneh where he was the head of the waterfront and I was for a short period a swimming instructor. Though a versatile athlete, Doch’s real passion was the teaching of the Hebrew language.

Weinstein’s major achievement was his twenty-year period as President of the Chicago College of Jewish Studies, later called Spertus College, from 1964-1984.

My friendship with Isadore, or Yitzchak Twersky – he was called “Ickie” back then – began in the late 1940’s when we were both students at Hebrew College – he was a class ahead of me – and at Camp Yavneh.

Twersky’s career at Harvard was indeed distinguished. He inherited the Littauer Chair in Jewish Studies from his mentor, Harry Wolfson, and taught there until his death in 1997.

I will add something Band doesn’t mention, that famously at the same time he inherited the Chair of his late father and sat as the Head Rebbe of Boston while he was the Littauer Professor at Harvard, and dare I say a first for both Harvard and for the Hasidic Movement.

Band is modest enough not to say anything about himself in this listing, but I will add a few words about him. Arnold Band was the most important

Ep #11: Memoirs

figure in the teaching of modern Hebrew, including Israeli literature in the United States for a long period of time.

He occupied a chair in Hebrew Literature University of California in Los Angeles for several decades. He was author of the first important study of Agnon in English, *Nightmare and Nostalgia*, long before Agnon became famous because of the publicity of the Nobel Prize.

I would say that Band was the first person who taught Hebrew literature in America who was taken seriously by Israeli as well as American scholars. He authored a masterful translation of Rabbi Nachman's Tales, which I had the privilege of having some small part in. And I wanted to add that both Band and Twersky were major figures in the founding of the Association for Jewish Studies in 1968 or '69, and thus played an important role in the development of that whole field of endeavor as it has existed in succeeding decades.

Rabbi Jeffrey Summit: Thank you for joining us for this episode of *Speaking Torah*. We want to thank Emily Hoadley for our logo, and Hebrew College Rabbinical student and composer Jackson Mercer for our theme music *Esa Einai*. To learn more about Hebrew College, please visit hebrewcollege.edu/podcast. And remember to subscribe, like, and rate *Speaking Torah* on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to podcasts.

We'll leave you this week with *Rom'Mu* by Craig Taubman and performed by Hebrew College Alumni Cantor Richard Lawrence, Cantor Kevin Margolius, Cantor Vera Broekhuysen, and Cantor David Wolff. I'm your host Rabbi Jeffrey Summit. See you next time on *Speaking Torah*.