

## Faith-wrestling

Larry Stillman

I've tried to figure out just what is my religious, cultural, and ethnic identity for over thirty years. I think it's a work in progress, so I'm going to present a set of episodes as an exploration of the complexities of identity. What it does show, I think that as a person matures, so does one's thinking. I don't think that I have any right answers, but then I stand outside any notions of religious orthodoxy. Obvious stuff perhaps, but certainly not obvious at the time they are written. And it also shows that so much of my life has been a strange relationship with the city of Jerusalem where I lived for more than four years and I have been back to a number of times since, as recently as October 2006.

My early years were traditionally European-Australian. When I was twelve there was the Six-Day War, and I remember sitting in the classroom, and we were discussing the war. I knew then that we as Jews, even in far-away Australia, were threatened by the Arabs. I think that it was at a Habonim youth-camp (a Zionist youth group that we were asked to establish where our loyalties would lie if there was a war between Israel and Australia-- the answer, to the Zionists, was obvious.

If you can accept that around the age of twelve the Jewish community, religion, the synagogue, Jewish holidays and family were the parameters of my world, I would like to go back even further, to when I must have only been two or three, because my earliest memories seem to centre on the same sorts of activities. I suppose that all children's lives are centred on such restricted

areas, but I think that already at a very young age there was a picture of US and THEM-- the "Australians". Most of my older relatives--that is the ones who survived the Holocaust--were Yiddish speakers, and even those a few years older than me had a good knowledge of Yiddish. I remember seeing serial numbers tattooed on many people's arms and plenty of memorial books, with gruesome photos.

When I was very little, we would often visit my father's parents in Melbourne, Carlton, when it seemed that everyone there was Jewish, and not the exclusive area of Italians and the affluent young urbanites as it now appears to have become. I can remember crawling around on the floor of the synagogue where there is now a high-rise housing estate, and going to the kosher butcher's on Nicholson Street. I must have understood Yiddish then, since my grandmother used this language with all her Jewish shop-

keepers. My father's mother used to delight me by blowing down the necks of chickens to make them whistle—I have not tried that since I was little, so I'm unsure if it was a trick or my imagination. She would lay meat on a marble block in the backyard off Rathdowne Street, to let the blood drain off, in accordance with the laws of kashrut. I enjoyed seeing the blowflies settle on the netting laid over the meat.

But my life wasn't exclusively urban. We also spend summers when I was small in a country town in Victoria. Shepparton, was, and still is, the centre of the fruit-growing industry in Victoria. In Shepparton, however, there was a community of Jews large enough to support its own synagogue, and to have left some very strong memories with me. The Feiglin family, I know, had been settled there for a long time, and there was another group of Jews with a very particular agricultural orientation.

The Hachsharah prepared young agriculturists for resettlement in Israel, according to the doctrines of Zionism. I have no idea now of how many people actually undertook the training course, but there are probably some kibbutzim in the Galilee co-founded by Australians who received their training in the Goulburn Valley forty or more years ago. It certainly made a great impression on me, to sit on a tractor and bump down the back roads of Lemnos. The Alpesteins were another family who had lived in Shepparton for a long time. They were quite religious, and though I can still hear Mrs. Alpesteins nasal Australian drawl, their kitchen was strictly kosher, divided into milk and meat sections, with cupboards segregated by colour. Blue for dairy foods, red for meat, I think. I got them muddled up as a kid. Such was their adherence to religious law that they lost a crop one year to frost, rather than violate some Holy Day.

I went to a Jewish school for a couple of years in Melbourne, then, for financial reasons, to a state school. Three or four times a week I attended what still called 'Heder' (Hebrew for 'room'), traditional religious instruction at the synagogue. It wasn't very good, but I learnt ritual prayers by heart, was given further instruction by my

religious grandfather, and by the time I was 13, was going to synagogue almost everyday and wearing phylacteries during prayer. This was pretty traditional stuff, but by the time I was 14, it was more or less abandoned. I certainly had to great Jewish learning, no Talmud, no sense of theology. Melbourne had its strictly orthodox Lubavitch movement, which followed the messianic teachings of its rabbi in New York, and there was liberal or reform Judaism, but nothing appeared attractive to an inquisitive mind. By the time I was a teenager, it was completely rejected and certainly so at university as an undergraduate where I had virtually nothing to do with the various Jewish youth groups, particularly because of their zealous Zionism at a time when my universalist leftist politics weren't particularly sympathetic to such strident ethnocentrism.

## Israel

Yet, when I was 23 in 1976, I went and spent more than four years in Israel, doing a Master's degree, partly out of an easy way to escape a stultifying home environment, and because it was very cheap. My mother's side of the family had lived there in the 1920s and on another side, we went back to the time of the pre-World War One Turks, so there was a sense of roots, but not homecoming. I certainly noted that in my diary at that time. And I wasn't particularly Zionist either, and I was quite, quite secular. In fact, I continued being a left partisan, and continued to see the flaw in the Zionist dream with the oppression of Palestinians at that time, the rise of Jewish religious and nationalist fundamentalism, and what seemed to be the overall poverty of religion. I probably bore much in common with many on the Israeli left as well. I was also very hostile to what is known as the 'negation of the diaspora' in much Zionist thinking, which gives life outside of Israel no credence. At that time, it was a very strong ideology, but it did not stop a willingness to accept overseas money either.

Those four years had a profound, and I can now say a positive experience despite the ongoing political disaster that I see. It gave me the

Hebrew language, which I regard as key to understanding so much in Jewish history and experience. I specialised in the study of the ancient Near East, so I got a thorough grounding in the historical background to the three major religions while (rather immaturely) not studying religion itself. I was so ideological (and wrong) that I did not take any subjects in Jewish studies or Bible, something I now regret, but I did study several years of Arabic.

I rejected any possibility that religious ritual meant anything, and refused to go to synagogue, or even participate with friends in religious events. Again, I was like a lot of other radical Israelis of the time, seeking to forge another identity that was post-holocaust and post religion. This was also the 1970s, and Jerusalem, like many other places, was buzzing with countercultural lifestyles and attitudes, all upon reflection, embedded in the most exotic of cultural and religious locations, with the sounds of the mosque, church, or synagogue always available.

Thus Israel was my first experience of living as a young adult in a truly cosmopolitan and mixed culture, something that Australia was just coming to terms with. While I continually struggled with the negative side of Zionism, time in Israel did begin to educate me enormously about the richness and amazing diversity of Jewish culture (and something of local Palestinian life when the divisions were not quite so deep) –the very first person I spoke to in Israel outside the airport was a policeman—a black Indian Jew. I lived in a dormitory with mostly descendents Yemenite Jews, who at the same time, were blatantly racist and forced a number of Palestinian students out of the dorm to find their accommodation elsewhere. I also met Palestinians who passed themselves off as Jews. I certainly did not identify with a muscular secular Israeli identity found in elements of the kibbutz movement that was more or less blind to whose land they occupied and whose labour they sought to use. The contradictions of Israeli life, particularly when Menahem Begin was in government, and lunatic settlers were given free-reign on the west bank

were all most too much for me by the end of my stay, and I left the country with some bitterness.

## The US

But I also left because I had another opportunity, this time a scholarship to study in the United States, an opportunity that was beyond my wildest dreams, where I further specialised in the study of ancient Mesopotamia. I had too much knowledge of the origins of the Jewish religion to take it too seriously, and orthodoxy, with its emphasis upon ritual minutiae seemed at times as shamanistic as any other ancient faith. I had read the Sumerian and Babylonian stories of the flood—after that, the Hebrew Bible just seemed to be a book of mythology, allegory and historical accounts with a particular ideology to justify a particular form of religious practice as determined by the rabbis in the era after the destruction of the First and Second Temple and Exile. Any question of a personal god seemed right out of the question. I had read too many Babylonian texts dealing with the Job-like questions to think that Jews had a monopoly on the big questions or their answers. It seemed to me that many of the questions posed about human existence could be just as well dealt with out of a particular religious framework. It was only at that time in fact, that I began to once again, get interested in 'religion'. Perhaps it was an effect of once again being in the Diaspora, or I might have been maturing. I am not quite sure.

By the mid-1980s I was starting to read quite widely in what is known as modern Jewish thought and theology. I experienced something of the wonderful religious richness which exists in the United States, and the freedom to experiment. I still found religious ritual very hard to deal with, though I attended what is known as 'conservative' synagogue services and took a wonderful Talmud class. But it seemed to me that there was a 'problem' with being a knowledgeable and questioning Jew, because the pursuit of Jewish learning with its never ending quest for a technical minutiae and exactitude could at the same time serve to alienate one from broader questions of religion. If

you couldn't justify the existence of God, or the covenant with God and the historical destiny of the Jewish people, then you were in big trouble in justifying traditional religion. And of course, this is the case when you take any religious-normative system seriously.

By that time it was very clear to me that if I had any religion, it did not involve a personal god. Though I was profoundly impressed by writers such as Rabbi Arthur Washkow who wrote about God-wrestling—the struggle with Jewish tradition combined with a social justice perspective or Rabbi Michael Lerner and his Jewish renewal movement, the 'religion' thing just never stuck with me. Other writers (usually Rabbis from different Jewish streams) such as Emile Fackenheim, Richard Rubenstein, or Arthur Cohen all challenged me to think about the relationship between God/Non-God and humankind, even from a non-religious perspective. Where was our ethical centre in an unjust world? I was also influenced by the writings of Mordechai Kaplan, the founder of what is called the 'Reconstructionist' stream in Judaism, with its emphasis on religious naturalism.

Kaplan's work had been very influential amongst many American Jewish thinkers, but his own version of the daily prayer book had been banned and burned by some orthodox rabbis in 1945, making headlines in the New York Times. Kaplan did not see the issue as being one of a personal god, or divine election of the Jews in a more democratic and universalist world. The Torah (the Five Books of Moses), as well as traditional commentary (the Talmud and other works), are not viewed as complete, but emergent. Religion is always changing. The saving idea of Torah is that it is a key to a new Jewish ethnic 'which should encompass every phase in Jewish life and thought', from the standpoint of what has been the main point of Torah—namely the salvation of man (!). This is the Jewish messianic ideal that needs no messiah. Kaplan believed that he could reignite in the Jewish community (and this was the large American community after nearly a century of mass migration) a conscious sense of

community and piety in 'sancta': "the events, the heroes, the writings and the occasions...giving concreteness to the values deemed essential by the people to its existence.'

But I could also not commit myself to ritual, which was part of the Reconstructionist practice of Judaism. I was also alienated by what I saw as the self-satisfied comfort of much of the Jewish community that has lost its connection with its earlier age of migration and struggles for social justice. That sort of suburban religion that turned upon celebrating itself while paying lip service to others was not for me.

I consequently found that I was drawn to what is known as 'religious humanism' in the States, a long-standing tradition that rejects traditional atheism and rationalism. Yes, life is sacred, yes, we might need some ritual, but no, we don't need God. In the late 1870s, Felix Adler had left behind his reform Judaism in the US and founded the Ethical Culture Society and this movement, which still has adherents today, had attracted many Jews who rejected religious particularism for a movement centred around a higher ethical ideal. Adler's movement out of traditional religion was not unusual in the 19th century, and indeed, he reflected the religious radicalism which emerged in American reform Judaism at that time, the sort of religious radicalism which quite antipathetic to the reintroduction of traditional religious practice in reform Judaism today. I became a member of the Ethical Culture society until the mid-1990s and while I only attended one or two of its 'services', found the movement's writings and engagement in social change very inspirational, and continue to do so.

I also became involved with the Society for Humanistic Judaism based in Detroit. Rather than going down Adler's pathway, under Rabbi Sherwin Wine, it formed humanistic non-theistic congregations in the 1960s. It can be considered for better or worse, as a humanistic outcrop of traditional reform Judaism, strongly influenced by rationalist and democratic ideals. It has several rabbis who are affiliated, a journal, and a variety of events. For the first time, I felt I had met people I could be 'normal' with. There

was a sense of community, and even humanistic prayers.

For a number of years I was very happy in this sort of environment and I tried to practice something in my own way. In fact when my wife and I returned to Australia in the early 1990s, I tried to form a similar group here, but typical of any community group with strong difference of opinion, it didn't last. What I would have really liked in fact was openness from the liberal Jewish congregations, and support from rabbinical leaderships for us to experiment, but that was not the case. However, a small non-traditional 'Hebrew School' was formed, and this continued through the efforts of many people for about a decade. For many Jews on the fringe of the community, the group that we tried to form and the school were one place they could affiliate and be open about their identity without feeling stigmatised as having 'married out' or being 'non-traditional'. Our son, as with many other children, took part in a group, rather than individual bar mitzvah ceremony.

In our personal life, we have our occasional Shabbat meal—at which I use the inclusive Reconstructionist Sabbath prayer—and the Passover Seder meal, as a symbol of the struggle for freedom, is a highlight of our 'religious' year. On a public level, during the early 1990s, I did some writing on religious issues for the Australian Jewish News. Nowadays, but I am a frequent letter writer to the Jewish News in Melbourne as a member of the tiny Jewish left, trying to present the most critical views of current Israeli politics without falling into ignorant ultra-leftism. The fact is that there is an Israeli state. It is in a crisis, and it has to change. There is a looming issue that challenges any traditional conception of Israel as a "Jewish" state. It needs democratic, non-military answers to accommodate its future Israeli-Arab majority, and its neighbouring state of Palestine. I despair of a solution outside of the rise of someone like Nelson Mandela to lead both communities. Maybe—of all people—it will be the Pope, even though religion is not the answer, the symbolism is powerful to all communities.

However, I still find it difficult to sit through a synagogue service, even though I can read and understand the liturgy and sing many of the hymns. However, what I have found (is this a sign of maturity), or something more dangerous, I love visiting churches in Europe, or mosques in Turkey. I am not embarrassed to say that I find the cult of the virgin Mary—at least as expressed in Byzantine and Renaissance art appealing. I can stand for hours in front of an altar screen by Duccio. I suppose it is because there is nothing quite like the miracle of birth and a babe. And I had a sort of theophany in the Church of Heavenly Peace in Istanbul looking at a Byzantine cross in the dome, while beautiful music was playing in the background. But I don't see any true religious meaning in such emotional experience. It all goes back to Canaanite and Iron Age times, and beyond that to our earlier ancestors—look at any good archaeology book about ancient Palestine and you will see horned altars, statuettes of women, and tiny iron calves. And I can't resist statues that the Romans made of little angels. These are the stories and psychological archetypes that we can't escape from and with which we continue to struggle. And these angles and temples float with me all the time.

In fact, I was in Jerusalem in October and I go into a sort automatic drive, going to places that I frequently dream about, and here are some edited abstracts of my blog.

My brain knows exactly where to get my feet going to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, so I avoided the gangs of Arab youths hanging around Nablus Road spoiling for a confrontation with the police and headed to Damascus gate (I did see a gunship copter overhead, however). I would have liked to have taken some photos of them but it would have been much too provocative.

I stepped into the gloom of the Holy Sepulchre. A group of Franciscans were singing to organ accompaniment around the Sepulchre and Calvary, accompanied by an organ and billows of incense from a censer-waving deacon. It was nearing dusk, so the church was getting dark, and lit up by the candles they were holding (on

little sort of bookmarks or held in their fingers as they held up their lectionaries which I noticed, had the music in medieval type staves, not modern transcriptions. Pilgrims followed them around. A number were getting all teary being so close to the suspected tomb of Jesus. I walked around the rest of the church, which has the tomb chapel in the middle of a rotund.

It has been cleaned up a lot in recent years, so it really is quite beautiful in the gloom. But because of the feuds between the dozen or more church sects that have custody, some things never change. One chapel that was burned out years ago is still burned out, and a ladder that hangs precariously on a ledge is still there, because there is an argument about the ledge. And the religious weirdness continues. Vigorously praying at the Sepulchre was an orthodox Jew in a skullcap. This is about the most heretical think a Jew can do, but obviously, he had found his own pathway, and joined the congregation on his knees etc, swinging back and forth. I went down steps into the Armenian part of the church to look at a mosaic that I remember being restored and was bright and sparkling. Now it needs a clean.

Prior to the Church I was in the Ecole Biblique seeing a priest friend. The Ecole is on Nablus Road. My friend is a great and highly respected scholar. He is now 67--and I realise that I got to know him first when he was younger than me, in his mid 40s. He is now retired, but of course that means even more teaching for him, and he is at home here and hopes that 'they' don't send him back to Europe where he comes from.

That is the funny thing about being here for me. It is so much part of my youth so my mind is sort of stuck there, yet people are ageing, buildings that I once thought of as new are falling apart, and worst of all, many of the views of Jerusalem I loved are blocked because the trees have grown!! There was a doctoral defence starting at 4pm at the Ecole and a number of Dominicans were in the cassocks, there were a number of heavy-duty biblical studies academics from Oxford, Freiburg and elsewhere in Europe on the platform and the poor victim, a Korean priest was

there delivering his defence in French. All very formal and terrifying. My friend is pretty depressed about the state of community relations, including the breakdown of social order in the Arab community. The kids just do what they want and the quality of education has completely nose dived. He also is depressed about religious extremism. Funny hearing all of that from a Dominican who were not the most tolerant several hundred years ago. And he was also very amused to know that I bought a pair of purple cardinal's socks at the papal tailor in Rome.

I noticed have various new religious nuances. Clothes have always had great symbolism in Israel and you could identify a person by how he /she dressed, the type of skullcap the men wore etc. Traditionally, orthodox Jewish women have dressed very conservatively, with wigs or dark scarves or hats. There is a new trend for younger women to cover most, not all their hair with colourful scarves and god forbid! some even wear slacks with skirts over them (which Arab women have done for a long time). Some even wear skirts to below the knee, instead of to the ankle! I saw groups of them at the university. You even see couples of very religious looking men with hippyish clothes and their women in this sort of hippy look. We spotted one at lunchtime who even exposed her hair. They even have a new name for this religious trend which as an acronym means 'mustard', but translates is something like 'extra-observant nationalist religious'. I find it quite striking, and it is also striking that they, and other orthodox Jews also spend a lot of time glued to their mobile phones. There are even new age Jewish spiritualist bookshops.

Apparently, mobile phones and internet are having a strong effect on the ultra orthodox young as it is harder to keep them isolated from the rest of the world. However, there are special mobile phones which block access to secular services. In general however, there are far more religious people in Jerusalem than there were before and there are many more shops selling all sorts of religious articles. Being punctilious about

religious practice has become a big thing. There were a group of women in the bus station selling all sorts of religious goods.

I also saw groups of Arab students at Hebrew U but aside from the fact that they were speaking Arabic, they look much like Israelis. They looked a lot different years ago, in daggy clothes, though I saw a few hijabs as well. There hasn't been much time for politics, except my friend was on the one hand, going to vote for the communist party in the last elections, and on the other hand, she thought there was no alternative to the war in Lebanon. On the other hand, another academic agrees that it has been a complete disaster. From a visit to Haifa I met a number of PhD students who were opposed to the invasion, but they felt powerless to find a solution.

Security is tight. There are bag inspections everywhere—just down the road some months back the coffee shop was blown up, and the bus I take was attacked twice some years back. There are plaques in Hebrew to explosions everywhere. Soldiers are stationed outside public buildings and of course, there are soldiers with their guns everywhere—just shopping or going home. That is 'normal'. I noticed lots of young black soldiers, men and women. They are the children of the Ethiopian Jews who arrived here in the 80s and 90s. The racial diversity of Jews is something that the rest of the world doesn't really know of and knowing more of it might prevent some of the stereotyping. There are also lots of foreign workers, including Filipina carers, some who have been here many years and have families. Normalising their status is a big challenge to Israel. And on the subject of soldiers, my friend's son who started uni yesterday, spent two years in Gaza doing inspection of workers coming into Israel. He hated every minute of it. Several friends were killed.

At dinner last night, I heard about how distressing it is for progressive parents to have their sons go off into the army to witness horrible things. There is a culture of never whistle-blowing, and the kids get incredibly cut up at the humiliations they are forced to put upon Palestinians. But the bigger question, getting to

ask why 'we have failed and what to do next', is not asked. I spoke to another old acquaintance, and there is a similar alienation and distrust of the political process. The question of how to step outside the situation and encourage something different is not seen as possible. That is the tragedy. And there is so little contact with the other, the Palestinians, even though they are yards away, literally. The blindness is pervasive. Emek Refaim (an upscale Jerusalem neighbourhood) is full of Arab houses, but I doubt people care to know, or want to know the pre-1948 history of the area and what might be done for reconciliation.

You can see the separation wall down the road from my friend's house, but she had never realized this. We tried to get to drive to it but she was a bit apprehensive and there was traffic on the way, so we turned back. People are aware of the dehumanisation of Palestinian society, but it is rationalized as an outcome of the need to prevent terror. Today we had a lovely brunch at the Scottish Hospice—what an expensive treat—and I picked up a copy of Palestine Today. I was amazed to see the signs of at least a middle class society in a tourism magazine, but I am sure many Israelis would not believe it possible or that it was all a conspiracy of some sort.

And it is raining, that amazing mountain rain and the smell of the pine trees, and it is getting cold, that Jerusalem cold that I often dream of. And on my desk is the orthodox Hebrew prayer book. I often look at it.

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