

A memoir.

It was the spring of 1982. I was driving west on Route 80, to Hershey Pa, when my car, seemingly on its own, gravitated towards an exit on the road. I was nearing Tannersville Pa. where from 1943 through 1954 with a break of one year in Israel, I spent 11 years of my young life at Camp Massad. With iron discipline, I straightened the car out, knowing that first I had to get to Hershey for the rabbi conference I was leading. Inexorably I returned the next afternoon to Tannersville and Camp Massad, *b'harei ha-Pocono* (in the Poconos).

When I arrived at the camp, the caretaker refused to allow me in. I protested to him as to how I had been there for the first time almost 40 years before and that there was no way he could keep me out. He then allowed me to walk up that steep hill that marked the entrance, and to take a look around, “but not too long”, he called after me. The camp had just been closed and sold to Camelback, a ski resort-- an odd name, I thought, since I had known the small mountain that “towered” over the camp, as *Rosh Hahar* (“Top of the Mountain) where the *Pasei Harakevet* (railroad tracks) used to be, and where we sometimes trudged on a Thursday which was *Yom Tiyul* (Hike day), which gave the *mitbach* (kitchen) a day off and meant that we made *k'richim* (a Massad word for sandwich, later supplanted by the “linguistically purer”- *sendvichim*.)

I walked around the campgrounds which looked like a Hollywood set devoid of actors. Everything I remembered and more, was there, but no people. Bunk A 3 better known as “*Dekel*” (Date Palm) where I had started as a camper in *Geza*, in 1943, hadn't changed a bit. [Note to the reader; *Ivri Tzair* (Young Hebrew), abbreviated, spelled *Etz* (tree) and the camp population by age, in ascending order, was made up of *Shoresh* (root), *Geza* (trunk) *Anaph* (branch), and *Tzameret* (crown of the tree)]. Of such metaphors was the iconography of the place created. *Chadar ha-ochel* ( the dining hall), was still there, adorned with its *pitgamim* (pithy sayings of the Zionist fathers). *Im tirzu en zu agadah* (“If you desire it enough, it is no dream”-Theodore Herzl) was still there- seemed like it had always been. I walked through the camp, mostly in the *emek* (valley of Jezreel-the boys campus) though I bravely ventured into the *galil* (galilee-the girls campus) despite having been sternly warned years before that it was off limits to boy campers. The two were appropriately named, the *emek* being quite deep and the *galil* at the very top of the hill.

I was flooded by thoughts of what this place had meant to me, how it had shaped my identity in a most profound way. How its almost absurd dedication to Hebrew

and to the creation of an environment of Eretz Yisrael had molded my character forever. Those years at Massad had formed my identity as an American Jew, more than my day school education at Ramaz, more than my becoming a conservative rabbi, surprisingly even more than stays in Eretz Yisrael itself.

A flood of memories...odd memories...disconnected, yet each profound. This was the place that first taught me classical music. I had in my head Hebrew words for Brahms's first symphony, Schubert's ninth, Dvorak's New World, Hebrew lyrics for Mendelsohn's wedding march, and even for a conflation of "Dixie" and "Whistle While You Work". All used for anthems, pep songs and marches for the Maccabiah, the high point of the season when the camp was divided in two, given names from the Eretz Yisrael experience, *Ir* (City) and *Kfar* (village) *Chayalim* (Soldiers) and *Chalutzim* (pioneers), *Haifa and Jerusalem*, etc. and then competed in everything from sports to song, drama to cleanliness. [A minor oddity; I had the dubious distinction from 1943 through 1951 of never having been on a winning side in a Maccabiah. Finally, as *Rosh P'lugah* (chief honcho of *K'far* in 1952) I achieved my minor nirvana.] So much of classical music and some popular music from the 40's and 50's is etched in my mind in Hebrew. I spent winters looking for appropriate melodies for marching songs, for the Maccabiah. I found that Gershwin's "Strike Up the Band", would be terrific but to my regret never got a chance to use it. In 1948 the first year of *Massad Bet* (the idea was so successful that there was a second camp and later a third) I was part of what was arguably the best *k'vutzah* (bunk) ever, named *Merchavia* (a kibbutz in Eretz Yisrael). We had learned well, and used the Coast Guard Anthem to extoll our being last to *t'fillot* (prayers) and yet always first to breakfast.

My mind flashed to years later when Israelis would ask me where I learned my fluent Hebrew and would look at me curiously when I said that I had learned it in a summer camp run by a man who was *m'shugah 'edavar echad*, (the best English translation is probably monomaniac). His dream was a camp for American Jewish children where only Hebrew was spoken. He turned his dream into reality, (realizing Herzl's dictum in another area), and made the "impossible" happen, and that I told the curious inquirer is where and how I learned my Hebrew.

I walked to the flagpole, where *Mifkad* (the assembly) which began and ended the day took place. I saw in my mind's eye and heard in my inner ear, a counselor stepping out front and saying; *'k'vutzat dekel ;'arba'ah mi-sh'monah kiblu ayin hayom*, (In Date Palm Tree, [the name of our bunk] four out of eight campers received *ayin* today)--*ayin* being the first letter of *Ivrit*,- (Hebrew). This was the daily reward if your counselor thought you were making an effort at speaking

Hebrew on any given day. If your bunk got more “*ayins*” than any other bunk over a whole summer, the lot of you got “*degel Ben Y’hudah*”, (the Ben Yehudah pennant) in honor of the creator of modern Hebrew. If a bunk was incorrigibly derelict in getting *ayins*, they risked Shlomo’s personal attention, an outcome not greatly to be desired.

My mind recalled *t’kasim* (pageants) held most often on Wednesdays, when dressed in blue shorts and white shirts with the “*Ivri Tzair*” patch on the left breast pocket, (I still have one) we marched to one or the other flagpole, to witness a presentation about some Zionist accomplishment or other. My mind wandered to mock radio broadcasts, describing the news of the day in Hebrew and almost always ending with the baseball scores. I thought of the time in the dining hall where we learned The Partisan Song with Hebrew lyrics rather than the Yiddish “jargon” which was held in such contempt, a reflection no doubt of the kulturkampf which had shaken the yishuv 30 or so years earlier. A contempt which did not reckon with the tragic end happening, as we sang, to the great community who spoke “jargon”.

I thought of all the leadership that came out of this place. I recalled that first maccabiah, in 1943 when Gershon Cohen *z”l* and Gershon Winer both later to be heads of Jewish Institutions of learning, headed the two teams. I remember how that first maccabiah ended in a tie. *Tayku*--we were disappointedly told--only Elijah himself could figure out how Shlomo arranged for that to happen. “Hackie” Lookstein and “Louie” Bernstein, Orthodox leaders; Sam Karff, destined to be president of The Central Conference of American Rabbis,(reform); to whom I played back up first base, and who revealed to me years later that he envied me my first baseman’s mitt; the Rudavskys, the Gamorans, the Feinsteins, Alvin Schiff, later head of the Jewish Education Committee of New York, who was *madrach* (counselor) in A-4 when I was in A-3,; my own counselor, David Lifschitz,*z”l* known familiarly as “*Lamed*” (the letter of the Hebrew alphabet with which his name began) later head of Shaare Tzedek Hospital in Jerusalem; a mere smattering of the cornucopia of Jewish leadership who shared summers in this curious place.

I continued wandering for longer than the custodian would have liked, my mind constantly lighting on the profound impact this place had on me. Virtually all of the campers were obsessed with Shlomo Shulsinger, who created and ran the place with an iron Hebrew hand. I remembered Ray Arzt tell what was, perhaps a true story. In the midst of contract negotiations, Shlomo told him that Charles Kadushin, Ray’s very good friend, spoke Hebrew better than Ray, and Ray was

said to have responded; “and Bialik,(the poet of the Hebrew renaissance) spoke Hebrew better than you.” We laughed heartily when we heard that story. Shlomo had not only been bested at his own game but on his home field, Hebrew.

I recalled my first interview in the office on 46th Street where my father had brought me to sign up for this strange Hebrew speaking camp. I started to cry, wondering if they played baseball at this weird place and if so what did they call a ball and bat. Little did I know that Shlomo and his entourage had created a Massad dictionary full of arcane Hebrew terms for the nomenclature of baseball.

My mind flashed to 1955 when I left Massad for Ramah and didn't know what Shlomo's response would be. I received the following letter from Shlomo. Curiously enough, a letter whose Hebrew words I have remembered verbatim over the years.

יעקב:

איני מתראם לגמרא על שאתה עוזב  
את מסד. אני מקוה שתחדיר לתוך רמה  
את הקוים האידיאולוגאים של מסד.  
שלמה

“Dear Yaakov,

I am not at all angry that you are leaving Massad. It is my hope that you will infiltrate Ramah with the ideological convictions of Massad.

“Shlomo

This was a special place. This place with names from a far off land, this place where the leaders obsession with us all speaking Hebrew permeated down the levels, so that one felt an almost joyous guilt in violating that structure, but also learned to treat Hebrew as something very special. This place where reform, orthodox and conservative, in those years could work and play together and participate fully in their identity as Jews, with all of the variations involved.

I took my fill as I wandered around that day, of the soon, no longer to be, place of my youth. It curiously had not changed in the thirty years since I had been there - at least not physically. It bore the same slogans, the same standards and the very bunks in which I had slept and it had been a place that changed and shaped my life. As it came time for me to get back to Hershey to continue teaching, I found myself

wanting in some way to say “Kaddish” for the place. And yet, at the same time, to say “Hallel” for what it had done for me and for so many others in it’s own peculiar and unusual way.

It was time. I turned to reassure the custodian that I was not going to stay, walked back down the hill, got into my car and headed west on Route 80.