

Massad

Though Ramaz was special, **מסד** (Massad) was the most formative influence on who I am as a Jew. More than any other experience, it shaped me as far as my attitude and commitments to my people, **עברית** (Hebrew), and **ארץ ישראל** (The Land of Israel) are concerned.

My father had already made camping part of my brothers' Jewish education having sent them to Kindervelt¹ in the 1930s. My first sleep away camp bore an Indian name, Dalmaqua, whose season was truncated by polio that summer of 1941. In 1942 it was Surprise Lake Camp sponsored by the 92nd Street YMHA. Sometime in fifth grade my father heard of **מסד**. I have no idea how. He took me to 145 West 46th Street to Camp Massad's office where I met **שלמה** (Shlomo) Shulsinger for the first time.

My father and **שלמה** shared some personality characteristics. Kindred souls, each qualified as a monomaniac, in Hebrew, **משוגע לדבר אחד**. There was no idea that was too bizarre for my father. It was bizarre to have a camp where they spoke **עברית** (Hebrew), but he certainly liked the idea and wanted that for his son. **מסד** had started as a day camp on Long Island in 1941. They had shared a facility in Monticello, New York, in 1942. Now it was 1943. It was to be **מסד**'s first year as a two-month sleepaway camp located, as

שלמה and **רבקה** (Rivkah)

(his wife and co-director) would say,

בהרי הפוקונו

"Beharei Ha-Pocono" (The Pocono Mountains).

I didn't dare risk any serious objections. Few people even grown-ups did that with my dad. Being his favorite, I got some things, but the crucial ones were in his hands alone. If my father wanted it to happen, it happened! So his Jacob had become a commuter from New Jersey to Ramaz at age eight. We lived in Palisade New Jersey, across the Hudson River. I took a bus to the 125th Street Ferry-the Broadway 7th Avenue Subway to 86th Street and the cross town bus to Ramaz. One did what Dad said to do and it *was* a safer time-no one ever approached my in any negative way! At age ten I was sent to a crazy **עברית** (Hebrew), speaking camp called **מסד** Massad. A regular **חלוץ** (*Chalutz=pioneer*).

It became clear to me early that *everyone* in camp was scared of שלמה. Being scared of a monomaniac was not an unfamiliar feeling for me. From the point of view of a little kid, he was a *much older* man, a distant, to be feared figure with his jacket draped over his shoulders, sleeves hanging, walking stick in hand, obsessed with rooting out those who dared speak anything but עברית Hebrew. A significant dramatis personae.

A Reminiscence Says It All.

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 מסד. With iron discipline, I straightened the car out, knowing that first I had to get to Hershey for the rabbis conference I was leading. Inexorably I returned the next afternoon to Tannersville and Camp מסד, - בהרי הפוקונו (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 ראש ההר ("Top of the Mountain) where the פסי הרנבת (railroad tracks) used to be, and where we sometimes trudged on a Thursday which was יום טיול (Hike day), which gave the מטבח

(kitchen) a day off and meant that we made קרינים (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 דקל (Date Palm) where I had started as a camper in גזע (trunk of a tree—the group of kids older than the little ones in ערש (roots of a tree) in 1943, hadn't changed a bit. [N.B; עברי צעיר (Young Hebrew), abbreviated, spelled עץ (tree) and the camp population by age, in ascending order, was made up of ערש (root), גזע (trunk) ענף (branch), and צמרת (crown of the tree)]. Of such metaphors was the iconography of the place created.

חדר האוכל (the dining hall), was still there, adorned with its פתגמים (pithy sayings of the Zionist fathers). "אם תרצו אין זו אגדה" ("If you want 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 עמק (valley of Jezreel- the boys campus) though I bravely ventured into the גליל (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 עמק being quite deep and the גליל 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 עברית (Hebrew), and to the creation of an environment of ארץ ישראל (Land of Israel) had molded my character forever. Those years at מסד 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 ארץ ישראל 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 symphony², Schubert's ninth, Dvorak's New World, Hebrew lyrics for Mendelssohn's wedding march³ and even for a conflation of "Whistle While You Work" and "Dixie". All used for anthems, pep songs and marches for the מנכביה (Maccabiah), (known in other camps as a Color War), the high point of the season when the camp was divided in two, given names from the ארץ ישראל (Land of Israel) experience; עיר (City) and כפר (village), חילים (Soldiers) and חלוצים (pioneers), חיפה וירושלים (*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 מנכביה (Maccabiah). Finally, as ראש פלוגה (chief honcho of כפר in 1952) I achieved my minor nirvana.] So much of classical music and some popular music from the 40's and 50's are etched in

my mind in עברית (Hebrew). I spent winters looking for appropriate melodies for marching songs for the Maccabiah. I thought 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 מסד ב (Massad 2) the idea was so successful that there was a second camp and later a third), I was part of what was arguably the best קבוצה (bunk) ever, named מרחביה (a קבוץ (kibbutz-communal settlement) in ארץ ישראל). We had learned well, and used the Coast Guard Anthem to extol our being last to תפילות (prayers) and yet always first to breakfast.

My mind flashed to years later when Israelis would ask me where I learned my fluent עברית (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 משוגה לדבר אחד (a monomaniac). His dream was a camp for American Jewish children where only עברית (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 עברית (Hebrew).

I walked to the flagpole, where מפקד (the morning and evening gathering of the bunks at which the flags were raised and lowered) and 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;

קבוצת דקל ארבעה משמונה קבלו עין היום

In דקל Date Palm Tree, [the name of our bunk) four out of eight campers received עין today')—ע-ayin being the first letter of עברית, - (Hebrew). This was the daily reward if your counselor thought you were making an effort at speaking עברית (Hebrew) on any given day. If your bunk got more "ayins" than any other bunk over a whole summer, the lot of you got "דגל בן יהודה", (the Ben Yehudah pennant) in honor of the creator of modern עברית, (Hebrew,) a true exemplar of משוגה לדבר אחד (a monomaniac) who virtually single handedly resurrected עברית (Hebrew) from its moribund state to a living breathing modern language in daily use. If a bunk was incorrigibly derelict in getting עיןs, they risked שלמה's personal attention, an outcome not greatly to be desired.

My mind recalled **תקסים** (pageants) held most often on Wednesdays, when dressed in blue shorts and white shirts with the **עברי צעיר** (young Hebrew) 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 **עברית**, (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 lyrics⁴ rather than the Yiddish "jargon" which was held in such contempt, a reflection no doubt of the kulturkampf which had shaken the **ישוב** (the community of settlers in Palestine, thirty 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.e. Yiddish.

I thought of all the leadership that came out of this place. I recalled that first **מנביה** Maccabiah, in 1943 when Gershon Cohen **ל"ז** (may his memory be a blessing)⁵ and Gershon Winer **ל"ז** both later to be heads of Jewish Institutions of learning, headed the two teams. I remember how that first Maccabiah ended in **תיקו** a tie. --we were disappointedly told—only **אליהו** (Elijah the Prophet, who will announce the coming of the Messiah) himself could figure out how **שלמה** 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 *madrich* (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; the counselor in A2 was Carmi Charney, later T. Carmi the great poet, and even a later rebel from Hebraism, Noam Chomsky; 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 שלמה 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. שלמה 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 שלמה and his entourage had created a מלון מסד (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 שלמה's response would be. I received the following letter from שלמה. Curiously enough, a letter whose Hebrew words I have remembered verbatim over the years.

. יעקב

**איני מתרעם לגמרי על שאתה עוזב את מסד
אני תקווה שתחדיר לתוך רמה את הקוים האידיאולוגיים של מסד
שלמה**

יעקב / "Yaakov,

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

"שלמה

This was a special place. This place with names from a far off land, this place where the leaders obsession with us all speaking עברית /Hebrew permeated down the levels, so that one felt an almost joyous guilt in violating that structure, but also learned to treat עברית /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 קדיש/kaddish for the place. And yet, at the same time, to say הלל/hallel⁶ 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 80.⁷

After שלמה got the Reminiscences, he was thrilled with them and carried a copy with him everywhere. I come home one Sunday and my wife Ingrid says to me, "A Mr. Shulsinger called and you have to call back before 4 o'clock because he is leaving for Israel." So I sit down at my desk and call and suddenly in the middle of the conversation I become aware that here I am, a man of sixty talking to a man of eighty and I'm still worried about whether my Hebrew is good enough. Still worried! Yes! Some things never change!

נסד infiltrated and pervaded my consciousness and loyalties נסד is linked to every day life and peak experiences such as:

Partition Day. November 29 1947

As I write this, it is 50 years plus one day after the United Nations vote on partition of the Holy Land. It was one of those occasions indelibly inscribed on one's memory, as to where you were at the moment. It is Saturday afternoon, around 5:30 P.M. Dad and I are listening to the radio and the United Nations General Assembly partition debate. I'm not sure why Dad permitted listening to the radio that day. Perhaps it was because of the importance of the event. The radio was in the totally fixed up finished basement, equipped with bookcases, kitchen, eating table and the radio. We had not yet started using the upstairs kitchen, dining, and living room, which lacked a radio, (the main floor was still for guests only) when we heard that the United Nations had just voted to

partition the Holy Land. Dad and I exuberantly hugged each other and danced a *hora* around the room, with a sense of ecstatic joy matched, but few times in a lifetime. Just the two of us responding to the fulfillment of that two thousand year old dream. Mom is not there because she is at the store. Ace was in Tel Aviv at that time, fulfilling Dad's Zionist dream, and dancing there.

That experience and so many more came out of that really odd educational web Shlomo and Rivkah had created. When I first heard a news report on Kol Yisrael, Israel's radio station, on my first visit to Israel in 1953, my whole associative structure went back to hearing - **שדורי החדשות** (broadcast of the day's headlines) after supper at **מסד** - "עכשו נשדר את החדשות מי" (Here are today's headlines!) which then described events in Yugoslavia, France, New York and of course what really mattered to me, the results of the Brooklyn Dodgers/St. Louis Cardinals "crucial" baseball series.

מסד pushed Hebraism, suffused in the environment of **ארץ ישראל** (Eretz Yisrael,) manifested by language spoken and names given to places and things. Massad was summer camp for American Jewish kids in a Hebrew/Israel frame. **חלוציות** (pioneering), was honored for those already there, but there was little talking about "עליה". Literally "going up" to settle in The Holy Land. The "going up" is a positive value judgment **מסד** was the embodiment of informal education without sound modern educational principles, both ahead of its time and behind its time. Probably least useful in **מסד** were the *sichot* (discussion groups) held twice a week. This was as close as **מסד** got to formal education. Massad did not push "דתיות" (religious observance) in a formal sense. No case was made for it. Morning services and other observances were simply presumed. What was crucial in **מסד** were the people, the language and the environment that enveloped you.

On a visit to **שלמה** and Rivkah's home on Tzabotinsky Street in Jerusalem, I got lost by looking for their apartment on Tschernichovsky. (Those knowledgeable in the history of Zionism will know the immense ideological divide between the two.) When I finally arrived I jokingly said,

כחנידמסד הייתי באמת צריך לדעת את ההבדל
בין ז'בוטינסקי וטשרניחובסקי
אני באמת התבלבלתי
אני חשבתי שז'בוטינסקי זה טשרניחובסקי

"I really got mixed up. You failed to educate me properly as to the difference between ⁸ (a miniature **מסד** museum) in 1995, my closing words before the door shut behind me were,

רב תודות על מה שעשיתם עבורי ביודעים ובלא יודעים

"I am truly grateful for what you did for me, knowingly or not knowingly."

Among the photos in a **מסד** album, the 1944 camp photo shows my brother Norman in army uniform in the background and my mother and father. In a photo of a torah dedication at **מסד** there in the back is my father. It was he who gave me over to **מסד** that it might be foreground in my life. That strange place that changed me forever.

From 1943 through 1954 I spent 10 of 11 summers at **מסד** The only one I missed was the summer of 1953.

What was later to become the Hayim Greenberg Institute, a six month program in Israel from August to September, was offered to students at Hebrew teachers' colleges across the United States. Students of the Seminary College, where I spent 4 years simultaneously with my Columbia years, was administratively part of the Teachers Institute and thus were eligible. I, with some trepidation, approached Sylvia Ettenberg, dean of the Teachers Institute, told her that I heard that people were going to *Eretz Yisrael* and asked her if I might go. She took a chance on me and supported my going though my record at the Seminary College left something to be desired. To get the OK from Columbia and still graduate with the bicentennial class of 1954, I took nine credits that summer of 1953, breaking my Massad continuous attendance record. I got an A+ in French that summer, replacing the failing grade I had earlier underachieved in the same subject. It marked a symbolic turnaround in my academic achievements.

On the ensuing trip to Jerusalem, a "**מסד**" peak moment happened. A rickety old bus took us up the Judean Hills on the old winding road. As we ascended, we got used to and even a bit bored by the repetitive view of the

neatly terraced hills. Abruptly the driver negotiated a hairpin turn and Jerusalem in all its splendor stood suddenly and startlingly in front of us. With no advance planning for a moment our entire young lives had readied us for, we burst out singing a song we had all been raised with,

מעל פסגת הר הצופים

("From the top of Mount Scopus, I greet you, Jerusalem.")

Tears rolled down my cheeks, a shiver seized my spine. It was a moment that has lasted a lifetime.

Years later I was the new rabbi of Congregation Beth El. At the first Yom Kippur **נעילה** *Ne'ilah* service I wanted the day to end in dramatic fashion. Most congregations hardly made use of what was a very powerful moment. Immediately following the sounding of the last shofar blast, they would race through *Ma'ariv* (the evening service) with great rapidity. It was totally anti-climactic. Reaching back into my **נסד** experience, I borrowed a ceremony whole, cut and pasted it into the **נעילה** service and did something which was a first in that context, but which later spread nationwide. I had the lights shut, and had a children's procession enter, led by two children, one holding a cup filled with wine, the other a spicebox, followed by as many children as I could muster, with each holding a lit multi-wicked *Havdalah* candle.⁹ We then proceeded to sing the plaintive **הנביא אליהו** / "Elijah the Prophet"¹⁰, recite **הבדלה** (*Havdalah*) followed by the very dramatic **שופר** (shofar) blowing in the dark with the lights abruptly going on as the last sound of the **שופר** ended, then shouting out

¹¹ לשנה הבאה בירושלים

This meant passing up **מעריב** (*Ma'ariv*), which in light of my own history, I didn't mind too much, but it sure made the conclusion of the service glorious and dramatic, which I did like a great deal.

Foonotes

A leftist, Yiddish-speaking camp. At least my brothers knew Yiddish from my immigrant parents.

² Published in *Avar ve' Atid*, Vol.1, No. 1 The Joint Authority for Jewish-Zionist Education (September 1994)

³

אורים השמים הופכים אבניך בהיר
את עבריה, רבת היצירה, את נס התחיה מלהיב
לך לאומה, לאומה לאדמה את גבולותיך נרחיב עד שכל הארץ תל אביב
The lights of heaven turn your stones bright,
you are Hebrew, creative, the banner of rebirth,
For the sake of land and people we will expand your boundaries that all the land be
Tel Aviv

⁴ חיפה וירושלים אנו רוצים בשידוך עלו נא כל הערים בינתים לחגיגת התווד
כלתינו בלה בלה
היא עטרת הכרמלה החתן חסון, לב בחורה מזעזע חיפה וירושלים
Haifa and Jerusalem,
(the names of the two teams) we would see you wed, Let all the cities
come to the nuptials. Our bride is beautiful, the crown of the Carmel, the groom in his
strength stirs the heart of his beloved....
Haifa and Jerusalem...

⁵ For this song the two teams were Ir (city) and Kfar (village). This is Kfar's song:

אחד מכם נמצא, לפני שבוע בא לא מאמינים העירוניים אז הנה מה קרה
היה היה בן כרך אחד, לכפר הוא יום אחד ירד וראה אדמה היא תחית האומה
Up to here, "Whistle while you work." Now "Dixie".
זה רק קרה אחר יומים, אחז קרקע מלא חפנים וראה אדמה היא תחית האומה
לכן בני העיר עלו וראו שכן בכפר אין רק עפר, הכפר עתיד עמנו
עלו וראו תקות מדינתנו

One of you is here, came a week ago, the city folks don't believe it, so here is what happened.
There was a city guy, who came to the village, and realized that land was the life of the nation.
It took two days, he held a fistful of earth, and realized that land....
So, you city folk, come see that here there's not just earth, but the future of our people.
Come see the hope of our state, the village is our future.

⁶ There is a photo in Kovetz Massad (a collection of photos of camp life) of the giving of trophies at the end of the Maccabiah in which I emerged triumphant. In that photo Shlomo appears, along with Chayah Angstreich, the head of the other team. I remain unidentified. So much for Shlomo's vaunted recollection of everyone who went to Massad. Or perhaps I was just written out of the history of the place when I "defected" to Ramah.

⁷ אל נא תאמר הן זו דרכי האחרונה, את אור היום הסתירו שמי העננה,

זה יום נכספנו לו עוד יעל ויבא ומצעדנו עוד ירעים, אנחנו פה.

Don't say, "This is my final road" Though clouds have covered the sky. The day we have longed for will yet come, and our marching feet will proclaim, "We are here!"

¹⁸ An abbreviation for the Hebrew *zichrono leverachah*. May his/her memory be a blessing.

⁹ Upon saying to Sam over forty years later, "*heveh muchan*" (be prepared) he will instantly respond "*tamid muchan*" (always prepared).

¹⁰ The doxology used as a memorial prayer

¹¹ A prayer of praise and gratitude

¹² After Shlomo got the Reminiscences, he was thrilled with them and carried a copy with him everywhere. I come home one Sunday and my wife Ingrid says to me, "A Mr. Shulsinger called and you have to call back before 4 o'clock because he is leaving for Israel." So I sit down at my desk and call and suddenly in the middle of the conversation I become aware that here I am, a man of sixty talking to a man of eighty and I'm still worried about whether my Hebrew is good enough. Still worried! Yes! Some things never change!

¹³ Literally "going up" to settle in The Holy Land. The "going up" is a positive value judgement.

¹⁴ Looking for Shlomo and Rivkah's home on Tzabotinsky, I got lost by looking for their apartment on Tschernichovsky. (Those knowledgeable in the history of Zionism will know the immense ideological divide between the two.) When I finally arrived I jokingly said,

כחניך מסד הייתי באמת צריך לדעת את ההבדל בין ז'בוטינסקי וטשרניחובסקי
אני חשבתי שז'בוטינסקי זה טשרניחובסקי אני באמת התבלבלתי

"I really got mixed up. You failed to educate me properly as to the difference between Tschernichovsky and Tzabotinsky. I thought that Tzabotinsky was Tschernichovsky." That banter came directly out of Massad.

¹⁵ The Fast Day's final service as darkness approaches, symbolized by the closing of the gates.

¹⁶ The rams horn used during the High Holydays proclaiming God's kingdom calling all to repent.

¹⁵ Implements for the Havdalah service, marking the end of a Holy Day and return to weekday.

¹⁶ Elijah the Prophet, who will announce the coming of the Messiah.

¹⁷ "Next Year in Jerusalem" –which concludes both the Passover Seder and Yom Kippur..

