

Lavy's Shul

A Canadian Experiment in Reconstructionism

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ABSTRACT

Lavy's Shul - a Canadian Experiment in Reconstructionism

Sharon Gubbay Helfer, Ph.D.
Concordia University, 2006

Despite the fact that Reconstructionism is often referred to as the only “made-in-America” (USA) Jewish denomination, it was a Canadian community that was the first synagogue anywhere to call itself “Reconstructionist.” The founder and guiding figure of Montreal’s Reconstructionist Synagogue was Lavy M. Becker, who functioned as the community’s “honorary” (unpaid) rabbi in its first phase of development, from 1960 through 1976. Throughout this period, “Lavy’s Shul,” as it was affectionately known, was a vibrant experiment in Jewish life, a hybrid, containing elements of both *havurah* and synagogue, whose special character was described by a member of the community as “an assault on the heart and the brain at the same time.” This dissertation creates a portrait of this singular community in the context of its time. A framework of thought constructed around the themes of memory, identity, community and narrative is used to highlight the shifting tapestry of collective identities of a changing Canada within a world in flux, which is seen to form the backdrop to this community study. In the foreground, the founding and evolution of the synagogue are portrayed in some depth through profiles of Lavy Becker and of selected members of the founding community. These profiles are complemented by a characterization of community life and the “culture of conversation” that developed there. The interdisciplinary approach used here borrows elements from history and ethnography and is an adaptation of the methodology called “Portraiture.”

In memory of my parents,

Dr. Eric Gubbay

and

Aline Gubbay

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Chapter One

I Introduction

The scripture "This shall be written for the last generation" (Ps. 50:19) refers to a people that is moribund. But the concluding words "And a people which shall be created shall praise the Lord" imply that the Holy One, blessed be He, will transform that people into a new being. VAYYIKRA RABBA 30.

Epigraph from Judaism as a Civilization

Despite the fact that Reconstructionism is often referred to as the only “made-in-America” (USA) Jewish denomination, it was a Canadian community that was the first synagogue anywhere to call itself “Reconstructionist.” The founder and guiding figure of Montreal’s Reconstructionist Synagogue was Lavy M. Becker, who functioned as the community’s “honorary” (unpaid) rabbi in its first phase of development, from 1960 through 1976.¹ Throughout this period, “Lavy’s Shul,” as it was affectionately known, was a vibrant experiment in Jewish life, a hybrid, containing elements of both *havurah* and synagogue, whose special character was described by a member of the community as “an assault on the heart and the brain at the same time.”² In addition to the heart/mind divide, the Reconstructionist Synagogue of Montreal straddled other kinds of boundaries: institutional, generational and cultural. The result was a unique mix, whose defining dimensions were Lavy Becker himself and the group of people he attracted, the elements of Reconstructionist philosophy they were guided by, and the particular moment in time in which they all came together. Lavy Becker and many members of his founding group had identities forged in Jewish immigrant ghettos and in

¹ The synagogue that Lavy Becker founded was deliberately called The Reconstructionist Synagogue. The name was making a statement and declaring an affiliation; it was also departing from the norm, since synagogues traditionally have Hebrew names. In 1977, the year after Lavy Becker stepped aside, the community adopted the Hebrew name *Dorshei Emet* (Seekers of Truth), by which it is commonly known today. Throughout this dissertation and in keeping with the historical facts, the community is referred to as Montreal’s Reconstructionist Synagogue or “Lavy’s Shul.”

² *Havurah*: in this context, a small community of Jews who pray together. A full explanation of this term and its meaning in contemporary Jewish life is given in Chapter II.2 below, on page 52.

defining moments before, during and after the Second World War. They carried with them a set of reasons why the Reconstructionist philosophy of the movement's founding thinker, Mordecai Kaplan, would be heard and then interpreted with passion and conviction. Although the character of this community would remain intact well into its next phase of development, it shifted definitively in 1976, when Lavy Becker passed leadership on to Ron Aigen, then "a kid with a backpack and a guitar" from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, who brought with him the dreams, visions, needs and priorities of the baby boomers and helped usher in a new wave in the Reconstructionist movement.

As a member of this congregation since 1987, I had the opportunity to experience the synagogue during the years when Lavy Becker was still a presence, increasingly frail but persistent almost to the end of his days, and to observe the evolution of community life. When Lavy Becker died in 2001, the Reconstructionist Synagogue was on the threshold of a new era, about to move into the completely new synagogue building that Becker had had time to express some reservations about but did not live to see. The sense of the passing of an era was strong.

The genesis of this dissertation lies in my wish to understand what it was that was slipping away with the passing of Lavy Becker's generation and to document it while the warmth and intimacy that had characterized "Lavy's Shul" were still in the air. My objective has been to identify and describe the community as it was, by creating a richly textured portrait of it during the years when Lavy Becker was at the helm, from 1960 to 1976. The challenge of this study has been to construct a theoretical and historical framework in order to display this portrait to advantage and highlight its significance.

Building up the “portrait” and constructing the “frame” were carried out simultaneously, that is, interviewing and research on Lavy Becker and the community were done in parallel with reading in the different areas required to support this study. The methodology used is adapted from “Portraiture”, a qualitative approach developed by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis, presented in the Methodology section later in this chapter along with a review of the methodological issues that arose and how they were resolved.

Literature in four areas has furnished the historical background and conceptual framework for this dissertation, as follows:

1. Material on Mordecai Kaplan and the Reconstructionist movement was critical to an appreciation of Lavy Becker’s life path and the community dynamics in the synagogue that Becker created. An overview of this material is presented in this chapter.
2. Literature having to do with the themes of memory, identity, narrative and community provided a basis for articulating the key terms and concepts around which this study is developed. These terms and concepts are presented in Chapter 2, along with further material on Kaplan and Reconstructionism.
3. Historical material on Canadian Jewry generally and on the Jews of Montreal more particularly situates “Lavy’s Shul” in its place and time. This material is integrated into Chapter 3, which traces Lavy Becker’s life path starting with his birth in 1905 in Montreal’s downtown Yiddish-speaking immigrant community.
4. Chapter 6 focuses on the year 1967 and its importance on a series of levels to: the Reconstructionist Synagogue community; the Reconstructionist movement generally; the Canadian centennial celebrations; the theory and practice of civil religion both in

the United States and in Canada; Israel and the Six-Day War and finally, the emerging youth culture and the moment that some cultural theorists identify as the watershed between the modern and the post-modern. The readings that inform a reflection on this pivotal year for “Lavy’s Shul” and its environment are discussed in Chapter 6.

I.1 Situating the Study: Canadian Jewish Studies; the Phenomenon of Reconstructionism

The story of the synagogue community Lavy Becker created will contribute to Canadian Jewish Studies in three ways: first, as an introduction to the life of Lavy Becker, a man who made significant contributions to Canadian Jewish life, in and beyond his synagogue; second, as a portrait of a liberal synagogue community, one of only a few amongst the mostly Orthodox synagogues of Montreal and finally, as a reflection on the evolving narratives of Canadian identity before and after the Second World War, seen through the lens of Becker’s choices and life path and of changing times in his synagogue community.

As a detailed portrait of a Reconstructionist community at a critical time during Reconstructionism’s transition from school of thought into movement, this study will also contribute to an understanding of Reconstructionism within North American Jewish life.

A brief, analytical overview of the field of Reconstructionist studies is presented below.³ While this overview does not aim to be exhaustive, it does propose rough categories and landmarks within them in order to situate the contribution of the present work to the field. First, however, mention must be made of two scholarly articles about Montreal’s Reconstructionist Synagogue that were published in 1995 as part of *Ritual and Ethnic Identity: A Comparative Study of the Social Meaning of Liturgical Ritual in Synagogues*. (J.N. Lightstone and F.B. Bird, eds.

³ For a view of Reconstructionism within the broader context of the other Jewish denominations, see for example Marc L. Raphael, *Profiles in American Judaism: The Reform, Conservative, Orthodox and Reconstructionist Traditions in Historical Perspective*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984.

Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press). The two articles are “Ritual, Reality and Contemporary Society: The Case of a Reconstructionist Synagogue” by Jack Lightstone and “The Use of Non-vernacular Language in the Shabbat Morning Service of a Reconstructionist Synagogue” by Madeleine McBrearty. The project of the book to which these articles contribute is to explore how, in a secularizing Canada, home and synagogue rituals help to anchor the people who practice them in meaningful and self-evident social realities. The articles are based on research carried out during the Ron Aigen/baby boom period that followed the period under study here. These articles offer a worthwhile complement to the present study.

This dissertation presents the first detailed community study within what remains the unevenly understood phenomenon of Reconstructionism, where one of the enduring currents of interest has had to do with Mordecai Kaplan as an American thinker and the movement as being specifically “made-in-America.” The present study of a Canadian Reconstructionist synagogue that was important in the development of Reconstructionism should add some nuance to this area of inquiry and perhaps open new lines of questioning.

Material on Reconstructionism includes different areas of investigation and different kinds of documents in three main areas. The first has to do with Mordecai Kaplan, his biography, the development of his ideas and his place in the history of American Jewish life. The second area has to do with the growth of the Reconstructionist movement under the leadership of Ira Eisenstein, its development up until the founding of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 1968 and then the post-College era, in which Reconstructionism has functioned fully as a denomination. The third kind of material on Reconstructionism has been developing since the founding of the College and includes the work of faculty and graduates, thinking and writing about the evolving goals and content of the movement in the post-Kaplan and now post-

Eisenstein era. The following paragraphs review these three areas and situate the present study with respect to them.

Of the three areas of study identified, the most highly developed has to do with Kaplan's life and thought. Although ongoing work in this area is now clarifying the significance of what Kaplan argued for and stood for, misunderstandings of him and of Reconstructionism rooted in the past persist.

One reason that Reconstructionism has been poorly understood is that Mordecai Kaplan was a controversial figure who was appreciated quite differently in different parts of the Jewish world. He argued for a "maximalist" Judaism, that would include Jewish religious practice as its core, involvement with Israel today as its central focus for ethical nationhood and cultural renewal and also a broad knowledge, appreciation and enjoyment of the culture and history of Judaism understood as a civilization and not just a religion. As the epigraph he used to open his major work, *Judaism as a Civilization* (cited at the beginning of this chapter) suggests, Kaplan thought and felt in ultimate terms about his mission of renewing Judaism. Nonetheless, the bold innovations he felt strongly were necessary and the polemical way he argued for them upset people and led to distortions of his point of view. Many would have agreed with the sentiments expressed in 1967 by Michael Garber, President of the Canadian Jewish Congress, when he said that Kaplan was basically "only a person to disagree with" (see below on page 264); such people tended to dismiss Kaplan on the basis of caricatures of his positions. Further, although some of Kaplan's writing is wonderfully clear and succinct, it can also be dense and difficult to access. As a result, from the time *Judaism as a Civilization* was first published, Kaplan's followers worked to interpret him to the general public, which may in some instances have been a mixed blessing since popularizations can tend to dilute and in so doing, distort.

Misunderstanding also arose because the richness of Kaplan's inner life remained hidden, despite the fact that he kept a journal throughout his 102-year-long life, an astounding document that reached 27 volumes and 10,000 pages. The journals, now being edited by Mel Scult,⁴ document in detail conversations, meetings and people but also express the doubts and struggle about Judaism, God, and his own direction that plagued Kaplan. An example of the kind of misunderstanding that arose before Kaplan's inner life became accessible is the following passage from Charles Liebman's *Reconstructionism in American Jewish Life*, the first widely read and discussed, comprehensive article on Reconstructionism to originate outside the movement.⁵ Overall, Liebman's article is a well-researched, detailed survey and analysis of the phenomenon of Reconstructionism and it represented an important landmark in Jewish awareness of the movement. However, the following—while reflecting his public persona accurately enough—seriously misrepresents Kaplan, whose diaries express a lifetime of “grappling”:

Kaplan is certainly not a religious personality, as that term is commonly, and intuitively, understood. His own life, in the opinion of many of his former students, is not characterized by religious inner conflict. [...] Kaplan is even reluctant to grapple with problems of an individual or personal religious nature.⁶

Aside from Liebman's study, scholarly work in the area of Reconstructionism developed mostly thanks to students and followers of Kaplan. These include Mel Scult, Emanuel Goldsmith and Jack Cohen, people who had known Kaplan and who have continued to explore his life and deepen a conversation about his ideas. A first intellectual history/biography was written by Richard Libowitz and published in 1983, the year Kaplan died. This was followed ten years later by Mel Scult's excellent biography *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century*. In 1997, an important examination of Kaplan and Orthodoxy was written by

⁴ The first volume in the ambitious edited and annotated series Scult has taken on appeared as *Communings of the Spirit, the Journals of Mordecai M. Kaplan Volume 1:1913-1934* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001).

⁵ *American Jewish Year Book*, 1970, 189-295.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

Jeffrey Gurock and Jacob Schacter *A Modern Heretic and a Traditional Community: Mordecai M. Kaplan, Orthodoxy, and American Judaism*. To this list must be added the scholar of American Jewish life Arnold Eisen, whose interest in Kaplan is longstanding. Like many American Jewish scholars, Eisen has contributed to *The Reconstructionist* magazine; he also wrote a special Preface to *Judaism as a Civilization* on the occasion of its 60th anniversary and then, in honour of the 70th in 2004, orchestrated an innovative and well-attended conference held at Stanford University where a number of distinguished scholars who had not read Kaplan were invited to do so along with those who knew his work well. The ongoing efforts of Eisen, Scult and others appreciative of Kaplan continue to fill in and balance the view of him available both to specialized scholars and to a wider audience.

It has been clear from the outset that while Kaplan was the founding thinker of Reconstructionism, it was Ira Eisenstein who created the movement and pushed for the establishment of institutions, together with a group of disciples that included Lavy Becker. Eisenstein's autobiography, *Reconstructing Judaism*, gives a good background on the genesis of the movement, as does Mel Scult's *Judaism Faces the 20th Century*. An excellent article by Deborah Musher, a granddaughter of Kaplan, traces the critical passage between philosophy and religious denomination.⁷ More recently, Eric Caplan's *From Ideology to Liturgy* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2002), offers the first comprehensive institutional history of the movement as part of its examination of the Reconstructionist liturgy and its evolution.

Thinking and writing about Kaplan's life and legacy are carried on today to a certain extent apart from the activities of the current Reconstructionist movement, which are centered around its three institutional arms: the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Reconstructionist

⁷ "Reconstructionist Judaism in the Mind of Mordecai Kaplan: The Transformation from a Philosophy into a Religious Denomination." *American Jewish History* 86-4 (1998), 397-417.

Rabbinical Association and the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation. The contemporary movement is creative and growing in response to the needs and desires of its member rabbis and member congregations and to the needs being expressed in the broader pan-denominational Jewish community that it serves. This kind of responsiveness has been expressed, for example, in its series of academic and outreach centers: *Kolot*, The Center for Jewish Women's and Gender Studies, the Center for Jewish Ethics and *Hiddur*, The Center for Aging and Judaism. Developments at the Rabbinical College and at the Reconstructionist Federation continue to generate thought, activity and texts in new areas as the movement evolves.

Despite the impact that Kaplan and his thought have had and the reach of pan-denominational activities centered at the Rabbinical College, Reconstructionism remains the smallest of the Jewish denominations, claiming about 3% of North American Jews.⁸ Many Jews have never heard of Reconstructionism. For students and teachers of North American Jewish life, the segmented field just described, combined with the relatively low profile of the movement, can be confusing. The portrait of “Lavy’s Shul” developed here should fill a gap in the literature by presenting a holistic study in which the different parts of the Reconstructionist phenomenon are brought together. Kaplan is present both as the authority that enabled Lavy Becker’s synagogue experiment and as the man, inspiring, intimidating and warmly appreciated who is referred to in the Synagogue Bulletin as “our beloved Rabbi Kaplan.” Ira Eisenstein, lifelong friend of Lavy Becker is also in the picture, in the background, but significant nonetheless both as movement builder and as presence and role model, together with his accomplished wife Judith Kaplan Eisenstein.

⁸ It is difficult to know how solid this statistic is. It is cited from the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation website, which gives a September 2000 *Newsweek* article as source. The website also lists a total of 103 affiliates in 2003.

If Reconstructionist thought and movement building play indispensable supporting roles in this study, the leading roles are played by Lavy Becker and the people who joined him: they and the community they created are at the heart of the study. Their lives, their choices and their collaborative creativity brought Kaplan's ideas, and Lavy Becker's, to life; this study offers a look at what they did, from the inside, the first such portrait of a Reconstructionist community. Other aspects are also important. From the perspective of Reconstructionist movement building, the time period of this study is critical. The dramatic high point of the "Lavy's Shul" period comes in 1967, the year in which the 8th annual Reconstructionist Convention was held in Montreal, and the decision taken to support founding of a Rabbinical College. This study thus captures the life of a community on the threshold between the pre-College and post-College eras and offers a point of view as to the meaning of this transition.

I.2 Methodology

The preparation of this dissertation was accompanied by three sets of methodological challenges. The first had to do with how to gather and evaluate information on a community to which I myself belonged. The second was concerned with the significance of the information gathered and the third had to do with a method for presenting the whole.

I.2.1 Insider/Outsider

The challenge of researching one's own Jewish community can be seen as part of a broader question about the challenges and advantages of coming from within the Jewish community or from "outside" when researching Jewish topics. A brief analysis of the issues involved will serve to contextualize my own situation theoretically; this will be followed by a presentation of issues that arose in practice.

To begin with, however, it should be stated that the binary classification of "insider" vs. "outsider" and the assumption that the former will be subjective whereas the latter will be

objective with respect to an object of study holds little currency in the post-modern world. Any researcher studying a community will be located in a complex position in relation to that community, depending on a multitude of factors including age, gender, race, class or ethnicity as well as the specific set of presuppositions, often unconscious, that are brought to the work. The challenge of becoming aware of one's presuppositions faces "insider" and "outsider" alike. Nonetheless, the following few general points may be seen to apply.

"Outsiders" doing research into Jewish life may have difficulty gaining the trust of people in the community. Further, they may lack the empathy that would allow them to tune in to subtle cues relating to the community's sense of itself and its values. Finally, outsiders may not be able to gain access to the people and events necessary to an adequate understanding of the community.

For the "insider" other basic issues arise, issues primarily related to bias and "agenda." A Jewish researcher may be inappropriately driven by a desire to combat lingering negative stereotypes of Jews and to make the community "look good." Further, insiders may have a difficult time achieving the critical distance necessary for them to appreciate structural and comparative features of an environment they take for granted. Another kind of problem arises when "insiders" take certain issues to be self-evident and so do not analyze them properly.

These general statements are nuanced, however, by current work in Jewish studies. Samuel Heilman's work in Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox communities he does not belong to makes it clear that a Jew can also be an outsider with respect to some parts of Jewish life. A similar comment could be made about William Shaffir's work with the Lubavitch and other Orthodox groups, although these two examples further illustrate the fact that the terms inside/outside refer in this context not to absolutes but to poles that define a continuum. As another example

nuancing the overall picture, the complex relations that have existed between French Canadians and Jews in Quebec have stimulated a keen interest on the part of some Québécois scholars, “outsiders” for whom Jews have represented the “other.” The work of Jacques Langlais, Pierre Anctil and a number of Anctil’s students and associates have produced important work on the Jews of Quebec. Beyond this, Anctil’s knowledge of Yiddish and empathetic understanding of Jewish life and culture have earned him something close to “insider” status in many Jewish milieux.

On the question of bias and agenda, Richard Menkis suggests that early Canadian Jewish historians such as Louis Rosenberg may indeed have been motivated in their writing about Jews and farming settlements in Western Canada by a desire to counter images of the “unproductive Jew” and to legitimize the presence of Jews in Canada within the master narrative of Canadian history.⁹ Discussion at the 1999 American Academy of Religion-sponsored seminar for graduate students in Jewish studies included one senior scholar’s statement to the effect that it was all right for non-Jews to study Jewish life a little, but not to come too close, “we don’t want them in our bedrooms...” There is an underlying sense of threat from the outside here. This sense was reinforced later that same year at the McGill 35th anniversary celebration of the Department of Jewish Studies. There, a position was expressed that non-Jewish Marxist scholars could be using Jewish studies to promote an anti-Israel agenda. There are fascinating issues of insider/outsider, “we” and “they” involved here. There is a sense of superiority in some way, a feeling that non-Jews are not able to understand Jewish life. There is also a sense of the insecurity of the marginalized and negatively-stereotyped Do these old attitudes have any play in contemporary Jewish scholarship? I think not, though traces do remain, as illustrated here.

⁹ Course notes from the *Scholars and Identities* seminar organized and led by Menkis at Concordia University, Religion Department, January 2002.

A completely different sense of bias and agenda comes from looking at the work of post-war Jewish scholars of Jewish life. The seminal work *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi articulated the rupture that the social scientific study of Judaism causes between the practitioner and the practice. Specifically, as Yerushalmi put it: “I live within the ironic awareness that the very mode in which I delve into the Jewish past represents a decisive break with that past.”¹⁰ This statement poses the conundrum of the Jew as reluctant outsider to his/her own tradition. It also identifies the critical distance essential to any work of scholarship, including this one.

It seemed to me from the outset that I had both the advantages of access and empathy that come from being an insider at Montreal’s Reconstructionist Synagogue, and also a number of challenges, for the most part having to do with achieving distance and perspective with respect to something I was very close to. Brilliant community studies by Jews of Jewish communities, the examples set by Barbara Meyerhoff, Samuel Heilman and Deborah Dash Moore among others demonstrate how fruitful an “insider’s” work can be.

Once I began my work, I found that the theoretical issues I had analyzed beforehand were indeed relevant, but not highly problematic. The most persistent issue that emerged because I was an “insider” and a part of the community I was studying, was that I had internalized a rich and complex sense of this community over the ten years during which I and my family had already been members before I began to study. This meant that as I began to write, I was invariably checking the written version against an “original” – my own inner construction of the community. This inner construction was composed of two parts: on the one hand my sense of community life, continually adjusted in the process of observing, conversing and participating and on the other of my point of view, something that I eventually articulated as

¹⁰ Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1989, p. 81.

the “frame” through which the portrait I was composing would be viewed. On balance, although it raised issues to be resolved as I explain below, my involvement with the Reconstructionist Synagogue community served primarily to place stringent demands on the quality of my work and, I believe, to enrich and improve it.

I.2.2 Data Collection

The techniques used for gathering information on the community initially were the standard ethnographer’s tools of interview and participant-observation. My intention to begin with had been to develop a three-part study that would encompass the Lavy Becker years, from 1960 to 1976; this would have been followed by the period from 1976 to 2001, from when the young rabbi Ron Aigen arrived to take over from Becker until the decision was taken to reconstruct the community’s synagogue home; a short third part would have looked at community life in the new building. In accordance with this objective, I planned a set of interviews and a program of participant-observation.

I spent some time preparing an interview questionnaire, consulting models, developing questions and checking my protocol. When it came time to begin interviewing, however, the questionnaire seemed wrong and I put it aside. What I was looking for was the role played by Jewish identity along the path of a life. In particular, I needed to know what Jewish life was like for people when they were young, what kinds of connections and resonances, or dissonances, were involved. Further, I needed to find out how and why the paths of a series of quite different lives all led to Lavy Becker’s door, to a community that was neither a traditional synagogue nor a neighbourhood *shul*. What were the elements of connection that motivated the search for a synagogue; what were the elements of rupture that made the traditional affiliations of childhood and family unacceptable. I then wanted to know what the synagogue community had meant to people, what role it played in their lives. In order to listen adequately

to these stories, I wanted to be able to speak to people with as little artifice as possible. I needed to be able to listen carefully and respond to the flow of conversation, to follow it and to improvise in response to what people told me. For this, a complex questionnaire would have been distracting and an impediment, especially as I was speaking with people with whom I had already become acquainted, some of whom were friends. I found that three or four simple questions, together with the genuine interest and years of thought devoted to issues of memory and identity that I brought to the interviews, elicited a wealth of information.

By the time I began putting the material I had gathered into writing, the project had become more complex, as I explain below. It became clear that a three-part study would have been overly cumbersome and that I wanted to focus on Lavy Becker and the early community. This meant that only a subset of the interviews, those with people who had been part of the founding community or joined during the Lavy Becker years, could be used to tell the story of the community directly. However, there was no abrupt break or shift in community life when Lavy Becker stepped aside and Ron Aigen took over. On the contrary, the transition was smooth. Becker remained a loving and supportive presence and continued to attend “his” shul all of his life. This meant that almost all of the interview material was helpful to me in establishing a profile of the community and in confirming or challenging my initial sense of it. Elements of community life introduced by Ron Aigen, new programs and practices, helped to define the profile by contrast. The same is true of the material gathered during the year I spent in formal participant-observation.

Starting with the High Holidays in September 1999 and going through to the High Holiday services in 2000, I attended Shabbat services every Saturday. I also attended the discussion group that runs before services for one hour, from 9 a.m. to 10 a.m., in which Jack Wolofsky and Shulamis Yelin, two members whom I have portrayed here, were faithful participants. In

addition, I attended other holiday services throughout the year, as well as special events and celebrations. My husband and I, with our three boys, participated in the *pre-b'nei mitzvah* program, a year-long preparation for Grade Six children and their parents in 1997, 2000 and 2001. The dual role of full participant and observer was not always easy or always enjoyable, since analysis and observation contradict whole-hearted involvement. However, the dual role demanded the development of a kind of maturity that in the end was helpful. If particular events or issues became embroiling, one was forced to seek higher ground and a perspective that would contextualize what was going on.

After completing my first set of about 40 interviews, I carried out a thematic analysis of the material I had collected. The procedure, called CATA (Computer Assisted Thematic Analysis) is a simple one in which key words and ideas that reappear in successive transcripts are identified and then sorted into categories and sub-categories. In this way, categories having to do with Kaplan and with Lavy Becker and the community in the early days emerged naturally and could easily be brought together. Having analyzed the material in this way, I began the writing process, and met with a huge disappointment. It became quite clear to me that the material I had collected, though rich and interesting, would not be sufficient. The community as I had experienced and understood it could not be portrayed using only the ethnographic material I had collected.

I.2.3 Contextualizing the ethnographic material

At this stage I understood that in order to portray the community as I saw it, I would need to construct a frame, into which I would build the vocabulary of concern and the contextual information that would lend significance and resonance to the portrait. I also realized that I had been relying too much on my own sense of how things worked and that I needed a more

structured understanding of the life of the community, based on more than interviews and my own observations.

I began to look more closely at the historical period and to comb the archival sources that I had until then examined only summarily. During the course of this search, I made several discoveries of archival material relating to the 1960-1976 period, sources rich enough to dictate that I focus on this period to the exclusion of the later ones. Once I decided to include only the 1960-1976 period, most of the observations of programs and dynamics that I had made and thought about were no longer relevant to my study. Nonetheless, from all of the formal interviews and also from many more informal conversations, and from my different observations, I had gathered a strong sense of which qualities of community life that I had experienced were continuous with what the founding generation had created and which were new.

At this point I conducted a second set of interviews, focusing on the early period and including important meetings with Lavy Becker's children, Hillel Becker and Donnie Frank.

The first discovery that more intensive research yielded was a fuller appreciation of Lavy Becker himself. In 1976 Becker donated an important archive to the National Archives of Canada. The Canadian Jewish Congress also has a significant amount of material relating mostly to his work with them and there is some material as well at the Jewish Public Library. I had interviewed Lavy Becker; as well, with the rest of the community, I had enjoyed his presence in shul over the years and had followed with concern the last phase of his life. I had known something of his biography but had not appreciated the scope and detail of his different activities until I spent time at the National Archives and also with the personal archive kept by his son, Hillel Becker.

A combination of luck and persistence led me to a second archival source: six reel-to-reel tapes that had been made by the community during the 1967 Reconstructionist Convention held in Montreal and at the Hanukkah party held some months later. I found this material only after Lavy Becker had died in 2001. One of my biggest surprises during the research process was listening hard through the scratchy recording to an interesting, funny, bright man, in whose cadences and habits of speech I only gradually recognized a young Lavy Becker. These recordings were invaluable both in their specific content and in the way that they brought Lavy Becker and members of the community to life as they had been some 35 years previous.

A third source came from Saretta Levitan, co-creator and first editor of the Synagogue Bulletin. Levitan had kept a full set of Bulletins from the first one in 1968 until the spring of 1973 and also a full set of the Ladies' Committee minutes taken by Beatrice Brasloff.

Finally, in the mid-1980s film maker and community member Barry Lazar had done a series of tape-recorded interviews with synagogue presidents that were useful, as was a long video-taped interview that Lazar and his film-making partner and fellow shul-member Garry Beitel did with Lavy Becker in the context of the synagogue's 36th birthday.

While the archival sources helped to structure my understanding of the community, the material on Lavy Becker, especially his role in the 1967 Centennial celebrations, drew me into a search to understand the historical moment better. It was clear that 1967 was a critical year in several areas important to the synagogue community and the larger national communities in which it was embedded, as well as to the Reconstructionist movement. All of this historical background was essential to an appreciation of the spirit of the community in the 1960-1976 period. Similarly, it became clear to me that I had to know more about Reconstructionism. The significance of the material I had gathered could not be properly appreciated without

understanding the philosophy of the movement that Lavy Becker had chosen so deliberately to align himself with.

I.2.4 Putting it all together

The central terms and concepts that express my point of view are discussed in the next chapter. They include my fascination with relationships to the past and with the narratives of identity that enable these relationships. Complementary to this is my ongoing preoccupation with how narratives of identity are constructed, what kind of “we” is opposed to what kind of “they.” Such issues relate to the dynamics of life in a community like “Lavy’s Shul” and the society in which it is embedded, including the way that Quebec understands itself and how Canada has continued to evolve. They are important as well in the life of Israel. Questions relating to memory, identity, narrative and community accompanied my research from the beginning, shaping the questions I asked and the material I sought in constructing a framework to highlight my portrayal of the community. The challenge of the last phase of the research was how best to put all of my material together.

I worked with the material over a period of several years. From the beginning and consistently thereafter, it was clear to me that what I wanted was to produce a richly textured portrait of the shul community. This meant that rather than trying to answer targeted questions alone, I was after a multi-dimensional appreciation. In its overall approach and also in a number of its details, the method Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis call “Portraiture” helped to validate my priorities and also many of the specific decisions I made, including the way I worked with interview material and my use of metaphor.

The method called Portraiture was developed by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, sociologist and professor of education at Harvard University since 1972 and prize-winning author, in collaboration with Jessica Hoffman Davis, Director of the Arts in Education concentration at

the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Hoffman Davis is also a visual artist. Their book *The Art and Science of Portraiture*, states that the aim of Portraiture is “to capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences.”¹¹ This statement is a succinct articulation of my own goals with respect to the community I have attempted to portray and I have found the Portraiture methodology appropriate and helpful, especially in the areas identified and explained in the following pages.

On the other hand, the kind of portrait I wanted to create, based on the questions I brought to the material and my sense of its significance, is somewhat different from the wonderfully lyrical, insightful, inspiring and expertly detailed portraits documented in Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis’ book. The authors have developed a method designed to capture, as a portraitist would, “the essence” of their subject.¹² Although their approach privileges the multi-vocal in the way they work with people and give them voice, the authors’ view of their subject overall is from the single perspective of the portraitist. I determined that the presentation of my material needed to look from three different perspectives in order to attend to three aspects of the life of the community: the people, the philosophy and the period. That is, I had to portray Lavy Becker, founder and leader of the community, and also the people who joined him; the Reconstructionist philosophy that grounded Becker’s experiment and lent it authority; and the time period whose tensions and effervescence flavoured community life.

¹¹ San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997, p. 3.

¹² In choosing to speak about “the essence” of a subject, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis open themselves to criticism in a scholarly world where “essentialism” raises red flags. A critique along these lines was written by Fenwick English and published in the *Educational Researcher* 29-7 (2000) as “A Critical Appraisal of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot’s Portraiture as a Method of Educational Research,” p. 21-26. English makes several worthwhile points and presents his arguments skilfully but I find his article unconvincing overall. His theoretical critique remains dry and abstract beside the wonderfully alive, disciplined and inspiring work of Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis, which he does not really address on its own merits. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis might nonetheless have anticipated his “essentialism” critique and clarified the particular ways in which they use their vocabulary.

The *Portraiture* method was particularly helpful in three areas: the understanding of relationship in the context of the interview process; the way questions of “voice” are handled and the overall analysis of a flexible, iterative process through which emerging themes and telling metaphors are identified.

The opportunity to speak in depth with members of Montreal’s Reconstructionist Synagogue about their backgrounds and the paths that led them to Lavy Becker was an enjoyable part of the research process. I was grateful that people agreed to speak with me, was fascinated by what they had to say and, far beyond the terms of any research protocol, concerned that I not abuse their trust. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis clarify a point about “relationship” in the interview process when they cite the position of some researchers who “have a more circumscribed view that focuses on relationship as a tool or strategy for gaining access to data—a boundary that must be negotiated to ‘get the goods’ from the ‘insiders.’¹³ Their point is being made polemically but it expresses exactly what I did not want to do. By contrast, the authors suggest instead an approach privileged by feminist researchers, where it is understood that “relationships that are complex, fluid, symmetric, and reciprocal—that are shaped by both researchers and actors—reflect a more responsible ethical stance *and* are likely to yield deeper data and better social science.”¹⁴

The philosophy of reciprocity and respect is one I agree with, and all of the interviews were characterized by reciprocal engagement and warmth. As a member of the synagogue community, it was natural for me to engage reciprocally with the people I interviewed; at the same time, my tape recorder and the informed consent protocol that began the interviews made it clear that we were not having an ordinary conversation. Shulamis Yelin, whom I

¹³ *Portraiture* 136-7.

¹⁴ *Portraiture*, 137-8.

interviewed at length on three separate occasions, offered an interesting response to the formula “I do not intend to identify respondents by name.” “You can’t do that!” she said, “You can’t just use what people say and not give them credit for it!” Yelin’s anti-appropriation statement was quite clear, and helpful.

The decision to present portraits of community members, in which their names are used, was taken only after considering the question for a while. Once I had spent some time looking at Lavy Becker’s archive and begun to understand that he was a significant contributor to Canadian Jewish life, I realized both that I could not do justice to the full range of his contributions in my study and that I wanted to make a start. It was clear that I would be identifying Lavy Becker by name, and it was perhaps at this point that the study became multi-disciplinary, including both history and ethnography. Shulamis Yelin, who died in 2001, wanted to be identified. She too is a significant figure in Canadian Jewish life. The role she played in the Reconstructionist Synagogue and the role that it played in her life are of historical interest. Having secured the agreement of the other people whose portraits are included, in a climate of reciprocity and respect, it seemed logical to identify all of them by name. A small step perhaps, but methodologically an important one.

The authors of *Portraiture* say that the researcher is more “evident and visible” (p. 13) in this than in any other form of research. As activists, in relationship with their subjects, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis are part of the pictures they construct; as artist/researchers, committed to products that respond to both aesthetic and academic criteria, their “touch” is felt in the strong sense of point of view they communicate and in the life and colour of the language they use. Not all researchers, they write, will want to be as actively present as they are; the degree of presence of the researcher will vary. I have chosen not to have an overt presence except in the two introductory chapters. Nonetheless, though I aim in the rest of the text to

remain unobtrusive, it is true that I am present there too, in the way that Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis suggest:

The portraitist's voice, then, is everywhere—overarching and undergirding the text, framing the piece, naming the metaphors, and echoing through the central themes. But her voice is also a premeditated one, restrained, disciplined, and carefully controlled.¹⁵

If my voice is not overtly present in the body of the work, others are. Chapter 3 is a focused biographical sketch of Lavy Becker's life up until 1967, told with the help of excerpts from interviews with Becker, his children and community members. In this chapter, the life path of Lavy Becker acts as a structural framework that then carries a second layer of question and analysis, having to do with how collective narratives of identity shifted and changed over the course of Becker's lifetime. Becker's voice is a strand woven into this chapter and others as well; it is heard in a range of contexts from public, where he speaks to all of Canada and the world, to more "backstage" comments made at the Reconstructionist Convention, to relaxed and personal interview exchanges. The National Archives also yielded intense and personal handwritten "Synagogue Vignettes," written in response to Becker's work in Bergen Belsen after the war.

Chapter 7 contains a biographical sketch of Jack Wolofsky that projects his voice as one that resonates beyond his own biography and personality to pose questions about the nature of Reconstructionist community. Wolofsky is very much present here as the unique individual that he is; at the same time, there is an eloquence to his questions and his values that articulate more generally the depth of meaning that Reconstructionism had for the people to whom it spoke most directly and that express important challenges to the synagogue community and the movement as it was poised on the brink of its next stage.

¹⁵ *Portraiture*, 85.

Chapter 4 contains seven small portraits, presented predominantly in the voices of the members being portrayed. As in the case of Jack Wolofsky in Chapter 7, the portraits in Chapter 4 are intended to resonate on more than one level. They are meant at first to introduce real people into the text, not as composites or primarily as means to a different end, but as separate women and men whose commitment and individuality was the stuff out of which the “do-it-yourself community” was woven. Although the people here do appear as individuals, these are not fully-rounded biographies in the traditional sense. Rather, these biographical sketches were designed to capture first, a sense of where the person came from, both geographically and in terms of Jewish background; second, how Reconstructionism came into the person’s life and finally, what being part of “Lavy’s Shul” meant to her or him.

In selecting whom to include, I was looking for elements in the transcript material that resonated widely. I was looking for instances where the people I had interviewed articulated common themes well, so that I could gather a typical set of reasons why people chose to join Montreal’s Reconstructionist synagogue. In doing this, I was alert to the presence of apt metaphors or catch phrases and picked one for each of the seven people portrayed, so as to convey succinctly in each case a different reason for joining. As the authors write:

As the researcher listens for the nuance and range of individual voices, she is always alert to the metaphors actors use to symbolize larger themes, the images they keep returning to, the words and expressions they use most often.¹⁶

In listening for and placing the voices in my text, including my own, I was helped not only by the methodology outlined in *Portraiture* but also by examples of other studies of Jewish community that I found inspiring. Chava Weissler’s *Making Judaism Meaningful: Ambivalence and Tradition in a Havurah Community*¹⁷, Riv-Ellen Prell’s *Prayer & Community: the Havurah in American*

¹⁶ *Portraiture*, 100.

¹⁷ New York: AMS Press, Inc. 1989.

Judaism,¹⁸ William Shaffir's *Life in a Religious Community: The Lubavitcher Chassidim in Montreal*,¹⁹ Deborah Dash Moore's *To the Golden Cities: Pursuing the American Jewish Dream in Miami and L.A.*,²⁰ Samuel Heilman's *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra-Orthodox Jewry*²¹ and Barbara Meyerhoff's *Number Our Days*.²² In particular the last four highly successful studies of Jewish communities offered a set of models of how different methodologies could be used to introduce convincing and insightful new material about Jewish life after the Second World War to both scholarly and general publics. Each of these four studies provides rich offerings of example in the areas of method, dedication and professionalism. Heilman and Shaffir as sociologists, Moore as historian and Meyerhoff as anthropologist all find ways to combine their roles as storytellers and researchers with a sense of care and humanity and a skill in writing that lifts their work to another level of meaning.

Beyond issues of discipline and methodology, however, *Number Our Days* stands out for the quality of heart and soul that Barbara Myerhoff was able to bring to her project. The depth and intensity of her involvement with a particular group of people allowed her to touch something profound and universal. Myerhoff's point of view informs the editing and writing processes so that she is able to bring us, in the words of the people she speaks with, a slice of life which encompasses major themes treated in other Jewish community studies: secularization, gender, ethnicity, factionalism and the meaning of America, the Holocaust, Israel and "the immigrant experience" in Jewish life. The quality of voice Myerhoff creates in this study has remained an enduring inspiration.

¹⁸ Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989.

¹⁹ Toronto and Montreal: Holt, Rinehard & Winston of Canada, 1974.

²⁰ New York: The Free Press, 1994.

²¹ Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

²² New York: Simon and Shuster,

The study I have constructed, the portrait and its frame, is composed of different elements. My aim was that these elements should contribute synergistically to what Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis call an “aesthetic whole.” The creation of such a whole happens only in stages, which involve cycles of focusing in, writing, thinking, stepping back, making adjustments, seeking targeted pieces of information or perhaps a whole new element and then returning to the work of construction. As the authors write, “Portraitists join with qualitative researchers of all varieties in emphasizing the flexibility of research design and the iterative process of data collection and thematic development.”²³ Their articulation of the process of thematic development is also apt:

The development of emergent themes reflects the portraitist’s first efforts to bring interpretive insight, analytic scrutiny, and aesthetic order to the collection of data. ... the portraitist draws out the refrains and patterns and creates a thematic framework for the construction of the narrative. She gathers, organizes, and scrutinizes the data, searching for convergent threads, illuminating metaphors, and overarching symbols, (p. 185).

Working with the material as it accumulated through the different stages of my research into the people, the philosophy and the period that characterize “Lavy’s Shul,” the structure of the whole emerged slowly. I imposed order but my order was continually being subverted by the material itself and I had to re-order, rethink and rearrange. Metaphors imposed themselves as I worked to capture and communicate the patterns and meaning I was seeing emerge.

I.3 Overview of Chapters

This chapter has situated the dissertation with respect to Canadian Jewish Studies and to studies of Reconstructionism and given an account of the methodology employed. Chapter 2 begins by stepping back to present a framework of question and reflection, a point of view articulated with the help of a set of key terms and concepts centered around “memory” “identity” “community” and “narrative.” The second part of the chapter focuses in on the

²³ *Portraiture*, 188.

theme of community within Reconstructionism, beginning with Kaplan's thought as a response to the conditions of modernity and continuing with a more detailed look at his views on polity and "organic community" and the movement's pioneering of *havurot* or small study groups.

Chapter 3 begins the story of "Lavy's Shul" with an account of key moments of identity formation along the path of Lavy Becker's life, from Montreal's downtown Jewish community to New York and study with Mordecai Kaplan, to Bergen Belsen after the war and eventually back to Canada and a series of accomplishments on behalf of the Jewish community up until the founding of Montreal's Reconstructionist synagogue. The chapter title is "My Father's *Nusach*" (prayer melody). This refers to Becker's statement that in his synagogue community, even many years after he had handed over leadership to a younger rabbi, the congregation continued to pray using the melodies he had learned from his own father. Beyond this, the phrase is a metaphor for the path of Lavy Becker's life. It expresses the warmth he continued to feel for his father and the traditional Judaism he had learned from him. In Reconstructionism, Lavy Becker found a way to renew his commitment to Jewish life and so to be able to perpetuate his "father's nusach."

Chapter 4 introduces the community through the people who, along with Lavy Becker, created it. This is accomplished through the telling of seven abbreviated life stories. Each story exemplifies a different kind of path that led to Lavy Becker's door; each expresses differently the continuity/discontinuity with a Jewish past that was typical of Reconstructionists and each one finds its title in a resonant metaphor or catch phrase from the interview concerned. As well, the stories, with their different backgrounds, weave a tapestry that portrays a world in transition. The different worlds of childhood, in pre-Holocaust Europe or in pre-independence Morocco or in the "Yiddish utopia" of Montreal's downtown Jewish immigrant

community gave way to quite different realities for the adults portrayed. There is a poignancy to the coming together of these disparate stories and people's desire to create a new narrative, though the individuals involved might not have thought of it in these terms. In a deliberate attempt to afford a reflective perspective on this material, the stories, though carefully chosen and edited, are presented without overly much analysis or intervention.

Chapter 5 looks at the community Lavy Becker and those who joined him created. The life of "Lavy's Shul" is seen to be characterized both by a lively hybridity and by a "culture of conversation." These general characteristics are explored through a series of presentations that includes the special features of the synagogue building, the role of women and gender in the community, the form and content of the discussions the shul was famous for and the importance to the group of Mordecai Kaplan and the Eisensteins, Ira and Judith. Finally the section entitled "We were *Treij*" discusses how the community was received by Montreal Jewry and how people felt about it.

Chapter 6 focuses on the year 1967, a high point in the life of "Lavy's Shul." The significance of this year is considered through the details of a series of events in and around Montreal's Reconstructionist Synagogue from late May through the beginning of July. Historical detail is complemented in this chapter by theoretical reflection.

Chapter 7 documents the final phase of life in the Reconstructionist Synagogue community under the leadership of Lavy Becker. Changes became necessary as Becker wanted to move on to other things and the community faced the dilemmas of success in the need to expand its facilities. The heart of this chapter is a profile of Jack Wolofsky, who found in Mordecai Kaplan's Reconstructionism a way to understand and express categories of ultimate meaning. The intensity and eloquence of Wolofsky's way of living and understanding Jewish community

pose a kind of challenge as the year 1976 brings a changing of the guard. The new generation enters the picture emblematically in the person of the young rabbi Ron Aigen, a graduate of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and thus a representative both of the new wave in Reconstructionism and of the new energies of the baby boom generation. The last word in this chapter goes to Lavy Becker.

The final chapter reviews the results of the dissertation and suggests directions for further research.

Chapter Two

II Conceptual Framework: Memory, Identity, Community, Narrative

This chapter sets up the conceptual framework for this dissertation, first by stepping back to consider a set of terms with broad contemporary resonance and then by entering into the field of meaning created by Mordecai Kaplan and Reconstructionism.

The first part of this chapter introduces the point of view from which the portrait of “Lavy’s Shul” has been painted by explaining how and why I use a set of terms that together form the vocabulary of my point of view: “memory” “identity” “narrative” and “community,” and the associated concepts of “nostalgia” and “cultural hybridity.”

The second part of the chapter focuses on the meanings of “community” in the context of Reconstructionism and so enters the territory of the study proper. This section begins with Mordecai Kaplan’s main ideas about renewing Jewish community in America as a response to the conditions of modernity. This is followed by a look at the Reconstructionist movement’s pioneering of *havurot* as a practical response to some of the problems that Kaplan diagnosed. A distinction important to Montreal’s Reconstructionist Synagogue community will be made between the *havurot* and fellowships pioneered by Reconstructionists and the *havurot* introduced slightly later by the post- Second World War generation.

II.1 Points of View on Memory, Identity, Community and Narrative

The broad framework of question and reflection presented here has been constructed over time as a point of view on contemporary culture. Memory and identity as a pair of terms were adopted in response to a question about relating to the past in the context of Lavy’s shul. The term “narrative” was added following a series of reflections on memory and identity, resulting in the thought that human memory does not operate in a vacuum, remembering random bits

of data but that we remember in patterns, in accordance with story lines or narratives. Finally, the term “community” was added as it is central to this community study.

The terms as used here embody questions about belonging and about generational watersheds and different kinds of relationships with the past, concerns that relate specifically to the content and context of “Lavy’s Shul.” In order to appreciate the resonance of the terms, however, this section considers them broadly, from different perspectives. It begins by recalling the classical resonances of “memory” and “identity” and continues by noting the contemporary prevalence of these terms across a range of fields and proposing a rough synoptic categorization of the ways they are used. It continues with a focus on three of the categories identified and then presents the terms as used in the field of religious studies. Finally, two related terms, “cultural hybridity” and “nostalgia,” are introduced and the section closes with a personal statement.

II.1.1 Memory, Identity and Community as Cultural Preoccupations

The linking of memory with identity, individual and collective, is not new. The Greeks saw Mnemosyne (Memory) as mother to the Muses, progenitor of the arts that express and pass on a society’s sense of itself.²⁴ Without Memory’s children, there would be no culture, no collective identity. The link between individual memory and identity was also part of Greek mythology, where the river Lethe (forgetfulness) ran through the underworld and drinking of its waters prior to reincarnation was the prerequisite for a new identity. Further, the pattern in which futile attempts are made to hide unbearable truths from consciousness, the pattern of repression followed by the return of the repressed, was mythologized in the Oedipus cycle and other Greek tragedies long before its rediscovery by Freud. Although themes of memory and

²⁴ Apollodorus, *Library and Epitome* (ed. Sir James George Frazer). Theogony 1.3.1.

identity have distant roots, these roots run deep in Western culture and the fruit they bear today is fresh with immediacy and meaning.

II.1.1.1 Memory and Identity as Current Cultural Concerns

I turned to the literature on memory and identity because of a desire to understand the passing of a generation in Montreal's Reconstructionist Synagogue. While it had seemed to me that my interest was personal and particular, I soon discovered that scholarship and popular culture over the past couple of decades had been saturated with work focusing on memory as a central element in the understanding of identity, collective and individual. In the Jewish world, the seminal work by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, first published in 1982, met with immediate and unexpected success beyond the small academic audience for whom it was intended, and has been translated into French, Italian, Hebrew and German. A separate body of work is devoted to memory and silence in the post-Holocaust Jewish world. Outside the Jewish world, scholars in a range of disciplines including history, anthropology, philosophy, art history and film have focused on questions of memory. There is also widespread interest in popular culture, particularly having to do with individual memory. Movies, newspaper articles and phone-in shows in the past decade have touched on the themes of amnesia, repressed memory, recovered memory and false memory. A few examples will serve to illustrate the range of contemporary interest.

In Montreal, in the spring of the year 2000 I attended three different conferences in three separate domains all focusing entirely or partly on memory. From March 23 to 25, the Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art organised *Around Memory and Archive*, the fourth in its series entitled "Definitions of Visual Culture." At this conference, and in the exhibition that accompanied it, there were: treatments of social and cultural memory; questions about the fidelity/infidelity of our representations; and treatments of the complexities of the politics of

official commemoration, including both monuments and anti-monuments. In April, the *Blue Metropolis* conference featured a panel with Naïm Kattan, Nancy Huston and others on the topic of “The Art of Forgetting” where the question of whether writers have a “duty to remember” was discussed. Early in May, artists, writers and historians got together at the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre for the conference and exhibition “AfterImage: Evocations of the Holocaust in Contemporary Canadian Art.” Later that month, from May 15th to 19th, the French-speaking conference of learned societies Acfas (Association francophone pour le savoir), held its 68th Congress at the Université de Montréal. A colloquium at that conference took as its subject “Le non-mémorisable,” (that which cannot be remembered), where the themes addressed were “necessary forgetting,” the “great forgettings,” “that which resists memory;” and “modern techniques of amnesia.”

As the foregoing few examples illustrate, the range of contemporary interest in memory is broad. In order to deal more effectively with this material, to sort it out and to identify the elements of interest to my study, I developed a preliminary classification of the major axes around which this activity may be seen to be organised. There is nothing final about these categories and they are not mutually exclusive; the intention is that they help to sort out, within a diverse and complex body of material, the areas of interest to the present work.

1. The dynamics of memory and ethics: do we have a “duty to remember” (and sometimes, as in amnesty, a duty to forget)?²⁵

2. The dynamics of memory and politics: whose version of history is remembered?

Which version gets encoded into public memory through official histories and

²⁵ These two points are from philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s short essay “Memory and Forgetting” in R Kearney and M. Dooley, eds. *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999. In its focus on memory and ethics, this essay offers a beautifully succinct statement of the elements at issue in the problematics of memory and identity.

memorial sculptures, monuments, etc.²⁶ Also, how is political power used to erase memory?

3. The dynamics of memory and identity, including memory and history and memory and representation.²⁷
4. The psycho-dynamics of memory and trauma, including issues of repression, oppression, remembering and the release of “working through;” also the journey from shame to pride, and hence to the possibility of action, of intervening in history rather than being its victim.²⁸
5. The phenomenology and theology of memory, including questions relating to the nature of memory: what it is, where it comes from and what it means in the life of a human subject.²⁹

²⁶ For a thorough and enlightening exploration of these issues as they relate to Holocaust memorials, see James Young’s excellent study *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993).

²⁷ In France, Pierre Nora has been responsible for articulating this sense around the notion of memory sites, or *lieux de mémoire*. His major work on this subject runs to seven volumes in French and three in the English translation. For an accessible synopsis in English, see “Between Memory and History: les lieux de mémoire” (*Representations* 26, 1989). The topic of memory, history and representation is vast. The journal *History and Memory*, “dedicated to the study of historical consciousness” has been edited at the Eva and Marc Besen Institute for the Study of Historical Consciousness, Tel Aviv University and published at Indiana University since 1989, seven years after *Zakhor* first appeared in print. There are many other instances of this and related questions.

²⁸ Sigmund Freud’s two articles from the 1914 collection *Metapsychology* “Remembering, Repetition, and Working Through” and “Mourning and Melancholia” are repeatedly cited as central to the questions that arise in this category. A brilliant extension of the material in Freud’s essays is Domenick LaCapra’s book *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University, 1998). LaCapra questions and analyses a series of “case studies,” treatments of the Holocaust in scholarship, art, and public debate. He attends with painstaking care to the nuances of psychological dynamics, asking at every turn what kinds of purposes are being served: are these the purposes of working through, integrating, agency, re-investment in life ... or is this moment one of acting-out, of compulsion-repetition, of psychological subterfuge, that will inevitably lead to a “return of the repressed” in some form.

²⁹ This diffuse but important category includes Francis Yates’ impressive and intriguing study *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966) which follows the system of “artificial memory” from its early history as a device to aid Roman orators, into the Middle Ages and Renaissance through to the threshold of modernity. Yates documents the original system, based on memorization of complex architectural sites, and shows how, transformed from age to age and place to place, it was present “at the great nerve centres of the European tradition.” Mystical and esoteric approaches to memory would be at one end of the spectrum in this category. At the other would be laboratory work in the area of memory research. In this connection, Stephen Rose’s *The*

II.1.1.2 *Community in the news*

The sense of cultural preoccupation that exists with respect to memory and identity is also present in the area of “community.” The following anecdote illustrates the point.

In March, 2004, Garrison Frost, producer of an online arts magazine for Southern California, editorialized that:

In the local arena, particularly in the media, one encounters the word community with nauseating regularity. It's probably just because we're alert to trends in the local discourse that it occasionally seems as if the pervasive use of the word is a particular characteristic of the South Bay. [But it] is as true in Albany and Iowa City as it is in Torrance and Redondo Beach. [...] Community is easily the most overused, misunderstood and downright misleading term one is likely to encounter.³⁰

The observations Frost makes of language use in his part of the world, and that he generalizes to other parts of America, apply equally to Canadian usage. Any week spent observing the media stream or the things people say to each other will pick up a diverse collection, from general talk of “our communities” to a seemingly endless list, including examples ranging from the “soccer community,” “arts community,” “organic beef community,” to even the “child molesting community!”³¹

The preoccupation with community, the need and search for something suggested by this term, was analyzed by sociologist Robert Nisbet in his influential book *The Quest for Community*, first published in 1953. Nisbet’s analysis forms a useful foil for Kaplan’s thinking and is presented briefly in the next section on the ways Kaplan sought to renew Jewish community through his Reconstructionist project.

Making of Memory: From Molecules to Mind (New York: Anchor Books, 1992) is an extraordinary attempt to move through a chain of questions from observations of learning-related neurological changes in chick brains to the nature and ethics of human memory.

³⁰ July 22, 2006. <http://www.theaesthetic.com/NewFiles/community.html>

³¹ Thanks to Rabbi Richard Hirsch for supplying the final example in this series.

II.1.2 Narrative: Psycho-dynamics, Politics, Representation

II.1.2.1 *Construction and Deconstruction of Narrative: the Contribution of Psychoanalysis*

A basic insight into the depth of meaning of “story” or narrative comes from Freud’s analysis of the psychological dynamics of remembering, forgetting, acting out (repeating) and working through. This insight has been systematized and extended by post-Freudian analyst Roy Schafer and explained in his book *Retelling a Life: Narration and Dialogue in Psychoanalysis*.³² Schafer describes and illustrates his practice of psychoanalysis and discusses the theory that underlies this practice. Schafer retains the basic psychic structure that Freud proposed: a layering of awareness between conscious and unconscious, with the unconscious layer harbouring traces of difficult or painful early experiences. However, where Freud strove to specify the mechanisms whereby early desires and avoidances found their way into current behaviour, Schafer innovated in order to replace the mechanistic Freudian view with a more direct connection with language and narration. Schafer’s vocabulary of narration, enactment, versions and storyline offers a way of reading human behaviour in terms of its deep structure. We come to understand story not as conscious handicraft but as an often mute series of gestures written by each one of us in a unique personal language. This understanding enriched the sense of “life path” that guided the development of Chapter 4.

French psychoanalyst and feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray has addressed the storylines of Western culture, its founding allegories and categories, which she critiques as having been constructed on the basis of an exclusion of women, a putting away or out-of-sight of them (though not of unconscious awareness). Her analysis is useful in thinking about the dynamics of identity as they apply not just to women and men but also to other interconnected identities

³² Basic Books, 1992.

where the powerful oppress the powerless by constructing an “other” out of the material of their own fears and insecurities.

Irigaray’s response to exclusion has been to construct a linguistic, semantic space in which women may come to be, come into voice as Other to the male. Once a female Imaginary has come into being, articulated through new symbols, the female will be in a position to enter into dialogue with the male. This image of dialogue, where individual humans, or human groups, exchange with each other and not just with projections of their own psyches is critical as a model of healthy, creative functioning; I would argue that this kind of functioning can be seen in operation in “Lavy’s Shul.”

Irigaray’s analysis of woman as “other” has served here as a model for gaining some insight into the way Jews were seen as “other” in the “None is Too Many” form of the British narrative of identity that once predominated in Canada.³³ Such a narrative would have been constructed by projecting onto the Jews as a group the kinds of qualities and characteristics that exemplars of the “stiff-upper-lip” British model would have feared, or that would be inimical to their “storyline.” According to this pattern, some groups construct narratives of identity by defining a positive “we” against a negative “they.” In such polarized and oppositional definitions, the negative “other” must be kept out, cannot be admitted within the perimeter of “us.” But this other is not a real other; rather, it stands for all of the things whose absence allow “us” to be who “we” are – or rather, who we think we are or want to be. A variation on this pattern is the one in which two interlocking narratives of identity are constructed “against” one another, a polarizing of identities that can produce a range of results

³³ First published in 1982, Abella and Troper’s *None is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933-1948* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1982) documented the anti-Semitism that drove Canada’s exclusionary immigration policy during the years when Jews desperately needed refuge. This policy was summed up in the response of one immigration official to the question of how many Jews Canada should admit, his answer being “None is too many!”

from antipathy to war. To some extent this has been the case between English and French in Quebec. In more intense and tragic ways, it remains the case between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East.

The contribution of the psychoanalytic dimension as I understand it is to help appreciate the depth and force of these kinds of narratives. A story of identity is not just any story; it is a core expression of self, individual or collective, and attacking it can have the same kind of impact – and provoke the same kinds of defences – as a life-threatening physical assault. Given this, the fact that collective narratives can and do change, did change in Canada during the period of this study, is remarkable. These changes were possible because there were real shifts in the ground out of which national identity was formed: demographic changes and political change in the breakdown of Empire were among the factors of shift that produced the need for new stories.

II.1.2.2 “Qui est nous?” The Political Dimension of Memory and Identity in Contemporary Quebec

Issues of memory and identity have taken on special meaning in Quebec intellectual circles over the past decades, as the collectivity that is Quebec has struggled to redefine itself in the absence of the old Church-dominated stories. The Quebec provincial election of 1976, the year Lavy Becker handed leadership of his synagogue over to Ron Aigen, brought in the first Parti Québécois, separatist government. This election marked the beginning of an official government-led reconstruction of Quebec’s stories of identity, with French, protected by the Charter of the French Language, as *the* central unifying cultural symbol. The historic identification of Montréal’s Jewish community with Quebec’s anglophone minority made these developments doubly troubling for Jews. Aligned with the Anglo “bad guys” in Québec’s version of history, they further feared that anti-Semitism would re-emerge, as it so often had in their collective experience when intense nationalism entered the picture. A strange wrinkle in

these developments was the complex role that the Jewish community came to play in succeeding years in the construction of the nationalist story for francophone Québécois. While members of the old guard did indeed express anti-Semitic prejudices, those who saw themselves as creating a new, inclusive nationalism objected in the strongest terms to such behaviour. A small but influential minority of francophone Québécois courted the Jewish community for political reasons, but also with genuine human interest, an attention that for the most part was not reciprocated by the Jews. Whatever the mix of politics and ethics involved, separatist premier Lucien Bouchard specifically linked his 2001 resignation from politics with a condemnation of anti-Semitic comments made in public by party hard-liner Yves Michaud.

Issues of collective memory and identity in Quebec continue to be debated outside the heat of election and referendum campaigns. A significant difference of approach in this area separates an “old guard” from newer thinkers. Between the important, but ultimately sad and backward-looking *Genèse de la société québécoise*³⁴ by the father of sociology in Québec, Fernand Dumont, and the forward-looking essay by historian Gérard Bouchard entitled *La Nation Québécoise au Futur et au Passé*,³⁵ there lies both a commonality of purpose and a significant difference in approach.³⁶ Besides the difference in time horizons, between future and past, Dumont and Bouchard can be seen to be divided by a modern/post-modern watershed: Dumont sought to be the single voice of the French Canadian collectivity, with the English playing the role of negative “other;” Bouchard, on the other hand, has been looking for ways to integrate a multiplicity of voices into Quebec’s collective memory.

³⁴ Québec: Boréal, 1996.

³⁵ Montréal: VLB Éditeur, 1999.

³⁶ See Sharon Gubbay Helfer “Identity and Collective Memory in Today’s Québec: An analysis and discussion based on selected works by Fernand Dumont and Gérard Bouchard,” unpublished paper. Although I have not yet had the opportunity to explore it, it would seem that historian Jocelyn Létourneau challenges and extends Bouchard’s project in his *History for the Future: Rewriting Memory and Identity in Québec* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004).

The struggle to define a “nous,” a collective “we” for the Quebec of today and tomorrow continues. Ever since former Premier Jacques Parizeau blamed the defeat of the 1995 referendum on “money and the ethnic vote” and spoke in an exclusionary way about “nous les québécois” the search has continued to define a resonant sense of “nous” by answering the question posed in the title of François Parenteau’s documentary film “Qui est nous?” – Who is “we”? (Montréal: Productions Virage, 2002)

II.1.2.3 Representation and Misrepresentation: Collective vs. Collected Memory

Much of the literature on memory and identity at the level of the group or nation includes the term “collective memory” and finds, as I have found, that psychoanalytic vocabulary is useful or even indispensable. However, such vocabulary can easily be overused or misused. In this context, I have found a point made by James Young particularly useful and important. Young objects to metaphors that suggest a society is like an individual, and so “remembers” collectively:

Readers will [...] note that I have tried to avoid applying individual psychoneurotic jargon to the memory of national groups. One of the problems with ascribing psychoanalytic terms to the memory of groups is the consequent tendency to see all the different kinds of memory in terms of memory-conflict and strategies for denial. If memory of an event is repressed by an individual who lacks the context—either emotional or epistemological—to assimilate it, that is one thing. But to suggest that a society “represses” memory because it is not in its interest to remember, or because it is ashamed of this memory, is to lose sight of the many other social and political forces underpinning national memory. [...] ³⁷

Writing about the Holocaust memorials that are the subject of his book, Young gives us the term “collected memories,” which points to real life, with its diversity and dynamism. This is useful as a complementary concept when thinking about collective identity in the way that I do in this study.

In fact, one of my aims is to break down the notion of any memorial’s “collective memory” altogether. Instead, I prefer to examine “collected memory,” the many

³⁷ *The Texture of Memory*, xi.

discrete memories that are gathered into common memorial spaces and assigned common meaning. A society's memory, in this context, might be regarded as an aggregate collection of its members' many, often competing memories. If societies remember, it is only insofar as their institutions and rituals organize, shape, even inspire their constituents' memories.³⁸

Young's point about collective versus collected can be extrapolated from memory to identity.

Chapter 4 presents seven biographical sketches of distinct men and women, rather than a "collective" collage, a processed generality of identities meant to be representative.

II.1.3 The Context of Religious Studies

Apart from their valence as contemporary cultural preoccupations, the terms memory, identity, community and narrative can be placed in relation to each other within a religious studies perspective in such a way as to describe a traditional society. Such a model is a useful reference for premodern Jewish community and also takes the terms out of a broad cultural context and into the particular domain of religion and its study. It should be noted that both contexts, the religious and the general cultural, are of interest in the work that follows. Note also that although I have chosen to highlight the term "narrative" I am not attaching a specialized meaning to it, and I use it here interchangeably with "story."

A religiously-based community can be seen to exist in a world whose contours are specified in the community's sacred narrative.⁴ This narrative typically consists of a set of interrelated stories, a mythology, that explains how the world came to be. Sacred narrative locates its community in the world and outlines the roles of individuals within the community. It may also situate other collectivities within its universe of meaning and label them as friend or foe. Sacred narratives are typically "remembered" in two ways: by means of an oral tradition that tells and retells different parts of the story and through a set of rituals that anchor the mythology in the life of the community. Thus sacred story, and the ritual that anchors and

³⁸ *Ibid.*

enacts it, continually reminds individuals and community of who they are, why they are there and what they are supposed to do.

The skeletal model just outlined could apply to a range of religious systems from small, local ones to others that extend across space and time. If this model were to be used to describe Judaism it would also have to mention sacred texts and the system of law. Another critical point is that the Torah, the sacred narrative of Judaism, and the system of law derived from it, are authoritative because they are understood to be of divine origin. The Enlightenment, one of the two major markers of modernity, would shake the foundations of divine authority within Judaism and have a decisive impact on Mordecai Kaplan and his philosophy of Reconstructionism. As discussed in the next section, Emancipation, the other great pillar of modernity for Jews, would have an equal impact on Kaplan and his thought.

A remarkable fact about sacred story is its resilience. It is astounding to contemplate the fact that the same story has been read over, and over, every week of every year by Jews all over the world, ever since the scribe Ezra read the Torah scroll to a soaking crowd assembled in the public square in Jerusalem in the 5th century BCE, in a moment eternalized as “the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month” when “all the people sat in the open place before the house of God, trembling because of this matter, and on account of the great rain.” (Ezra 10:9) In Montreal’s Reconstructionist Synagogue 2500 years later consummate storyteller Shulamis Yelin – whose father was a socialist determined to be free of all religious “claptrap” – and herself in no way a traditionalist, wanted to come to shul every week, to “a place where the Torah is read.”³⁹

³⁹ Interview by author 5 July, 2000. See below on page 143.

A final note with respect to the religious studies model is that it has been extended to the realm of national narrative, notably by Robert Bellah (see below on p. 291). A national state can be seen to retain the allegiance of its subjects and ground their feeling of participating in one national community by means of a “civic religion”, a system of story and ritual similar to the one outlined above. Chapter 6 considers the notion of civic religion in Canada in the context of the Centennial Interfaith Conference chaired by Lavy Becker.

II.1.4 Identity and Boundary; Cultural Hybridity; Nostalgia

A simple statement about the concept of identity is that it entails the idea of boundary. In order for there to be a “me” or an “us” there needs to be a way of delimiting the identity, a boundary such that on the other side of it lies “not me” or “not us.” One of the questions I am asking in looking at the evolving collective identities that form the context for the Reconstructionist Synagogue is, how have Jews been represented in Quebec and Canada and how has the representation changed? How, why and when did the boundary of identity shift from excluding Jews as “not us” to including them and other previously “out” groups in new pluralist national understandings. Lavy Becker’s role in changing this picture is a theme developed in Chapters 3 and 6.

The proposition just put forward about identities and boundaries is general and flexible: it applies both to the identities of human individuals and groups and also to other areas of interest here, including generational identities and the “identities” that are labelled as historical periods. In all cases, once there are identities and boundaries, there is the possibility of crossing boundaries – and boundary-crossing moments are interesting. One thematic focus of this dissertation is on the moments in which the boundaries between these periods are crossed, both between premodern and modern, and between modern and postmodern. Specifically, Chapter 6 will reflect on the year 1967 and consider some of the reasons why it may be

considered as a watershed between the modern and postmodern periods. This is not a question of abstract or theoretical interest in this context. Rather, it is a way of thinking about the baby boom generation that came into young adulthood in symbolic ways in that year.

With respect to Lavy Becker's generation, I would argue that Becker himself and some, though not all, of the people who joined him, had childhoods in environments that shared a number of characteristics with premodern communities. For example, there was something of the *shtetl* about the downtown immigrant community in Montreal, despite the fact that its context was modern. The sense of community created by the Yiddish language, the intimacy of the environment and its physical boundedness (despite completely open borders) and the self-help ethic that prevailed all suggest the kind of self-contained world described in the skeletal model above. Critically, for people like Lavy Becker who grew up in Orthodoxy, the sacred narratives of Judaism remained authoritative in the world of his childhood. When Celia Gordon, on her lunch break from work in the button factory, looked over at the man beside her eating a ham and cheese sandwich, and waited for God to strike him down, and nothing happened – a boundary was crossed. Celia left the premodern world of her father, which “sort of fell apart for me, when I began to question” and became a modern young woman, determined to think for herself.⁴⁰ Leaving the world of childhood is a life-cycle event for all humans, but for Celia Gordon, Lavy Becker and Reuben Brasloff, as illustrated in chapters 3 and 4, it also meant crossing the threshold into a new worldview. This was the break which for some meant they were not able to return to traditional practice. For them, Mordecai Kaplan's narrative constructed a doorway they could walk through and remain within a Jewish world that otherwise they would have had to leave. As Chapter 4 illustrates, I have looked for and noted

⁴⁰ Interview by author. See below on page 123.

this kind of boundary-crossing moment, as it is a feature of the kind of life path that led to Lavy Becker's door.

Boundaries are interesting where conditions are conducive to boundary-crossing or where boundaries dissolve or can easily be ignored. Under such conditions in a culture, identities that had been kept apart come together and new entities are created, "cultural hybrids" in which unlike elements live together as unstable compounds on the way to forming discrete new mixes. In her fascinating small book *Hybridité culturelle*,⁴¹ Sherry Simon explores the notion of cultural hybridity in the specific context of Montréal's Mile End district. This is followed by a discussion of hybridity as "a fact and a value" in which Simon tracks the connotations associated with the term, which were at the outset pejorative (borrowed into French in 1506 and in English into 1601 from the Latin *ibrida* meaning "bastard, of mixed blood" and especially the progeny of a wild boar and a sow). Today, Simon maintains, hybridity carries a positive valence, in line with the changed nature of cultural relations, no longer marked by exchange but by interpenetration and contamination. Simon presents the hybrid as an unstable, intermediate step in cultural encounters, between meeting and mixing and a new synthesis: a créole, a métis, a mestizo, a chicano.

The idea of hybrid is useful in the context of this study. As I understand it, the unstable, intermediate stage between two identities is an open, creative moment, in which dialogue and exchanges of different kinds of information and influences are alive and flowing. My reading of "Lavy's Shul" between 1960 and 1976 is that this was such a moment. A new narrative of identity was being created by the community, and in the midst of this process, nothing was fixed or frozen. Different identities, people with quite different Jewish backgrounds, secular and religious, Ashkenazic and Sephardic were in conversation. As well, the nature of the

⁴¹ Montréal: L'île de la tortue, 1999.

community was that of a hybrid, having some characteristics of a traditional synagogue, some of the Reconstructionist study group/*havurah* and some of the energies of the new baby boom counter-culture kind of *havurah* as well.

A further point has to do with the notion of hybridity as seen from the perspective of traditional Judaism. Because the notion of boundary goes together with that of identity, the idea of “mixing” and the crossing of boundaries it entails runs completely counter to certain constructions of identity. “Separation” is a figure that runs through the Jewish world, from God’s separation of day and night at the dawn of time, to the intricate set of procedures necessary to distinguish and separate food we eat from food we don’t eat; the sacred is separated from the rest, the Jews from the nations, the Sabbath from the rest of the week. Mixing is anathema; for example, linen and wool may not be woven together. Hybridity then is transgression. From the perspective of Orthodox Judaism, Kaplan was transgressing. Despite his passionate conviction that he was doing so in order to help to renew Jewish life, Kaplan knew very well when he was crossing into forbidden territory, for example in the moment related in Chapter 5, when he became convinced that it was fitting and necessary to pronounce the Tetragrammaton, the holy name of God that traditionally is never spoken. Kaplan did things that you “don’t do” and some of the tension that accompanies transgression mingled with the excitement of creating new forms in Montreal’s Reconstructionist Synagogue community.

A final point concerns “nostalgia.” Like hybridity, this concept involves instability. Neither memory nor fantasy, it relates to the past but is not obliged to it. In his book, *Rethinking Modern Judaism: Ritual, Commandment, Community*⁴² Arnold Eisen offers a useful discussion of nostalgia, arguing that it is the “new *mitzvah*” or commandment. In making this point Eisen is, it would

⁴² Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

seem, arguing for an understanding of the creative synthesis that the practice of “nostalgia” achieves, allowing sets of contradictory forces to remain simultaneously present.

Eisen’s writing about nostalgia is based in his observation of practice. This includes contemporary practice in the Jewish environments he is part of, and also the (short) trips American Jews make “back to the old neighbourhood” or back to Europe. Eisen’s observation of the practice of nostalgia is also based on the historical record, starting with the trips made by mid-19th-century Frenchmen out into the countryside where their fellow Jews lived in an earlier, simpler, more coherent way ... as they idealized it nostalgically from a safe distance back in Paris.

Some of the richness and nuance Eisen brings to his writing about nostalgia comes from his introduction of a Freudian notion of ambivalence. In their wish to be full participants in the here and now available to them, Jews need a way to “kill the father” (and the mother too, Eisen says). In their wish to benefit from the pleasures of remaining Jewish, however, these same Jews need a way to keep the father, or the ancestors, alive. Nostalgia, Eisen writes, is their rather brilliant solution.

Two final points further nuance Eisen’s presentation about nostalgia. In describing nostalgia as the new *mitzvah*, Eisen is saying both that it connects Jews to their past as did the halakhically-ordained *mitzvot* and also that there is about it a sense of being compelled, as with the traditional commandments. He leaves open the question of what this new type of connection with the past will lead to. He does suggest that it may prove a conduit to deeper identification for at least some Jews.

Finally, Eisen raises questions about the dynamics of nostalgia as he has presented them by suggesting that nostalgia exists only because repression and nightmare also exist.

It will become clear as we probe the images and counterimages of Jewish remembrance, I think, that without Jewish nightmares there could be no Jewish nostalgia: no need for its heavily edited remembrances and belabored forgettings, no raw material for the dreams of wish fulfillment directly expressed in nostalgia or the nightmares that not infrequently appear in distorted form or at the margins of remembrance [...].⁴³

Eisen does not elaborate on what he means by “edited remembrances and belabored forgettings,” nor by “Jewish nightmare” although this almost certainly refers to the Holocaust or perhaps more generally to the persecutions Jews have been subject to in different places and times throughout history.⁴⁴ For me, the completion of this point is critical. What could be seen to be implied is that nostalgia is chosen instead of memory because memory is painful: who wants to carry “Jewish nightmare” as personal memory? Far better to take control and pick which elements will be remembered by cutting them out and keeping them in a pretty frame on the mantelpiece or the wall. The connection with the past is there to nourish and inspire, and to fulfill in some way one’s obligations to the ancestors, but not to disrupt and overwhelm.

Eisen’s point is rich and intriguing, with implications that likely extend beyond where he first carried them in *Rethinking Modern Judaism*. Personally, alongside all those others who want to be able to look at life head-on, as honestly as possible, I have an aversion to nostalgia. My own perspective on memory, identity, community and narrative is given in the next section.

II.1.5 “The Space Between Dreams:” A Personal, Postmodern Frame

Memory, identity, community, narrative: these terms resonate deeply within the context of the postmodern period. The shared narratives that have articulated the contours of the Imaginary in Western culture have been deconstructed to reveal the repressive power relations they had masked. Boundaries that used to hold the world in place have dissolved or become fluid. The generation that came into young adult consciousness around the year 1967 stands in a field of

⁴³ *Rethinking ...*, 169.

⁴⁴ Eisen’s use of the terms “nostalgia and nightmare” together may refer to Arnold Band’s book entitled *Nostalgia and nightmare: a study in the fiction of S. Y. Agnon*.

meaning littered with the shattered narratives that the Holocaust and Hiroshima destroyed. If it is true that shared narratives are collaborative creations, if, following Freud's model of dream construction, they are woven together from elements collected along the paths of human journey, then this postmodern period is an in-between, a time without story, a space between dreams.⁴⁵

The point of view from which this dissertation is written carries at a deep level the metaphorical, personal understanding just articulated. I believe that there is chaos at the heart of the imaginary realm and that this will probably lead to new kinds of story for our communities – but that we have not yet decided where the boundaries of community will next be drawn.

As metaphorical and personal as it is, the understanding of our time as a “space between dreams” has implications relevant to the framework of question and reflection developed in this section. The postmodern time period is thus understood to be an open and creative moment in which communication across boundaries becomes critical. Speaking and listening are seen as essential to the development of a new collective sense, an extensive network or mycelium, to use Freud's term, which can serve as the ground from which new and inclusive narratives can grow.⁴⁶ This perspective animates the point of view on shifts and changes in the

⁴⁵ This image draws on the model of dream construction Freud articulates in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where “dream thoughts” are gathered constantly in the process of day-to-day life, are interwoven within the subconscious and then erupt into dreams, as a mushroom will push above ground out of its extensive underground mycelium (see note 46). There is also an understanding that post-modernity has deconstructed meta-narratives and even the very idea that there should ever again *be* meta-narratives, leaving the field open to personal story – as attested to by a contemporary inundation of memoirs. The idea of a “space between dreams” would be that a vast number of new impressions must be gathered and woven together before the next “dream,” or collective narrative, can erupt. Finally, in this note on dream and narrative, I want to recognize French philosopher Sarah Kofman, whose elegant, eloquent and powerful expression of the impossibility of narrative after the Holocaust is given in her memoir *Paroles suffoquées* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1987), dedicated to the memory of her father who died in Auschwitz. Equally powerful is Kofman's autobiography written not long before her suicide, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).

⁴⁶ In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud used the image of the mycelium, the vast underground network of fibres from which mushrooms sprout, as a metaphor for the web of “dream thoughts” that form the latent content out of which dreams manifest.

construction of collective identities, the drawing of boundaries, in the major polities important to Lavy's shul: Canada, Quebec and Israel.

II.1.5.1 The Ringelblum Archive

Before leaving this “personal frame” I would like to refer to a presentation made at the Reconstructionist Synagogue Friday evening, January 10, 2003 by David Roskies, Professor of Jewish and Yiddish Literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Roskies' topic was Yiddish song. He spoke about a “grammar of remembrance” and of how melodies were transferred from one context to another and eventually, of how the old Yiddish songs got transported into the Warsaw ghetto and even into the concentration camps where obscene lyrics and biting satire were grafted onto the melodies of the old songs. As part of his presentation, Roskies spoke about Emanuel Ringelblum and the Warsaw Ghetto “*Oneg Shabbat* archive.”⁴⁷ This was the first time I had heard about Ringelblum, the young historian whose training qualified him to appreciate the importance of documenting events inside the ghetto and whose socialist ideals led him to see every Jew as important, not just those with high profiles.

David Roskies' talk on Emanuel Ringelblum and the Warsaw Ghetto “*Oneg Shabbat* archive” was outstanding. He spoke with feeling. He talked about Ringelblum, his youth, his enthusiasm, his talent, his dedication to Jewish life, his desire to record it and his interest in self-help organizations and in history. Roskies talked as well about how Ringelblum felt the need to tell the story of the Jews differently from the way it was being told by Christian historians. Historian Arnold Toynbee for example believed that the Jews were a fossilized people, with no ongoing history. Roskies talked about how the Jewish academic historian's work then began, with Ringelblum and his helpers, to serve the community. Also Roskies

⁴⁷ Emanuel Ringelblum *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto: The Journal of Emmanuel Ringelblum* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974, first published 1958).

quoted someone, perhaps Ringelblum as saying “every Jew is a universe unto herself or himself.”

Every Jew a universe. This was an idea that struck me. If every Jew is a unique universe, then surely every Jewish community is too. To appreciate how precious was each individual and how unique the community they created together, this is the spirit that has moved my work on “Lavy’s shul.”

* * *

Although it looks back at a community that no longer exists as it was between 1960 and 1976, this is not a work of nostalgia. This is a portrait, the documentation and appreciation of a community.

The second part of this chapter leaves the personal and postmodern to enter different territory. It is concerned with the vast canvas of modernity and presents a universe of discourse that will introduce Mordecai Kaplan’s analysis of Jewish community and what had to be done to renew it in the context of American democracy.

The section begins with an overview of the challenges modernity posed to community, Jewish and non-Jewish; it continues with a presentation of Kaplan’s main ideas for renewing Jewish community and ends by discussing a topic of specific relevance to “Lavy’s shul:” the role of the Reconstructionist movement in pioneering *havurot* or small study groups, the kind of group that Lavy Becker led starting in 1934 and on which, to a certain extent, he modeled his own Reconstructionist Synagogue.

II.2 The Quest for Community in Modernity

Mordecai Kaplan's ideas about renewing Jewish community were a response to the conditions of modernity in America and should be seen in that context. This section prepares the ground by introducing American sociologist Robert Nisbet's influential book "Quest for Community" and then reviewing the effects on Jewish community of Enlightenment and Emancipation in Europe.

Both Kaplan and Nisbet believed that the advent of the modern nation state entailed a critical curtailment of human freedom. People lost their connections to the authoritative premodern communities through which they had had the power to govern themselves in meaningful ways – whether as self-governing *kehillot* in the Jewish world, or as self-regulating guilds, families or parishes in the Christian. Writing in the Cold War period after the Second World War, Nisbet was preoccupied in part in *Quest for Community* with the susceptibility of people to the powerful narratives of totalitarianism once the bonds of community and local authority had been broken. To guard against this, Nisbet's view was that there needed to be what he called "intermediate institutions" to which people could contribute and through which they could affect the conditions of their day-to-day lives. Kaplan's solution where American life was concerned was not dissimilar. Both men were intrigued by Durkheim's functional analysis of societal balance and both Kaplan and Nisbet emphasized the importance of engagement in community, where individuals actually affect their worlds rather than remaining powerless, as essential to a full and meaningful life. This quality of engagement, as illustrated in Chapters 4, 5 and 7 below, was woven into the fabric of the "do-it-yourself community," as the Reconstructionist Synagogue liked to call itself.

Robert Nisbet's *The Quest for Community* was first published in 1953 and then reprinted in 1972 under the title *Community and Power*. The book's central argument about community is that

“profound dislocations in the primary associative areas of society ... have been created to a great extent by the structure of the Western political State.”⁴⁸ This argument articulates a broad social issue that forms the context in which the Reconstructionist Synagogue was founded and evolved. The fact that societally meaningful, humanly resonant, intergenerational community is something people want, need, and enjoy, and that our society is not structured so as to include such community for all, forms the context in which people choose to join a synagogue or other associative group.

Nisbet condemns the patterns of power and authority in the modern nation-state, where the atomized person is not much more than an ambulating “vote.” The nation, he argues, is an entity far too large and abstract to offer human individuals a sense of power or belonging; too power-hungry to share, the nation is a unitary entity tinged with totalitarianism. Nisbet’s solution is to strengthen pluralism through support for “intermediate institutions” where people have a place, a role and a voice.⁴⁹

Nisbet locates the origins of the modern nation-state in the French and American revolutions and the ideas that enabled them. In order to retain people’s allegiance, the nation must be understood as repository of a supreme social good. In this context, Nisbet points to the importance of Rousseau’s *Social Contract* in granting a quasi-religious function to the secular state, a phenomenon that Robert Bellah would analyze in the case of the United States in his 1967 article “Civil Religion in America.” Nisbet writes:

⁴⁸ *Quest*, 47.

⁴⁹ One of Nisbet’s most trenchant arguments has to do with the way this kind of setup makes people vulnerable to ideological justifications for war, which Nisbet says are being waged in frightening ways on the basis of moral crusades. This latter position was what endeared this conservative sociologist to the counter-culture, and his book was re-published in 1972 under the title, *Community and Power*. Nisbet’s war argument rings eerily true at the time of writing when the United States is invading Iraq.

... [the] greatest value [of the Social Contract] lay in its ingenious camouflaging of power with the rhetoric of freedom, and in its investment of political power with the essence of religious community⁵⁰

The ideas about human relations expressed in the French Revolution placed individuals side by side in a world of liberty, equality and fraternity, where they would all be reasoning subjects. Individuals would think for themselves, as Voltaire and the Lumières advocated, and not be pushed around by or submit to outdated religious or political rulers.

Nisbet's contention is that the revolutions that ushered in the modern nation states were a mixed blessing for their citizens; citizens gained in individual freedom and democracy but were left poorer in their sense of identity and community.

* * *

As important as these issues were in the Christian host societies that Nisbet is writing about, they were possibly more powerful within the Jewish ghettos these societies harboured. As Nisbet notes, the French revolutionary movement that liberated the Christian masses from old social patterns simultaneously opened the gates of the ghettos and "released" the Jews:

The same temper of mind that led [the Revolutionary legislators] to the release of Jews from the ancient ghetto led them also to seek the release of millions of others from the guilds, the Church, the patriarchal family, class, and the local community.⁵¹

The disintegration of old patterns and the creation of new ones on all levels throughout European society, the Enlightenment and Emancipation that were the cornerstones of modernity, created the context for new sets of economic, political and societal relations and handed a set of challenges to people as to how to relate to each other in new ways.

⁵⁰ *Quest*, 158.

⁵¹ *Quest*, 159.

For Jews and their communities, the challenges were profound. The ways that these challenges were met differed from Western to Eastern Europe to the Americas, with significant variations from country to country in these regions. Despite regional variations however, throughout 19th-century Europe, as Gerson Cohen writes, those Jewish intellectuals who believed in the need to renew Jewish life all advocated modernization in some form. The forms arrived at differed largely in relation to the local Christian context:

In the 19th century, European-Jewish intellectuals who sought some form of Jewish regeneration all advocated modernization of Jewish life. Modernization meant changes in modes of speech and dress, change in economic pursuit, change in orientation to world culture. The quest, then, cut across borders, but the form that the Jewish quest took differed with locale, and in large measure because of the divergent Jewish perception of the Gentile world with which the Jews came into direct contact.⁵²

There were Jews at all levels, Cohen writes, for whom the hold of traditional piety was weakening. The framework of law that had held communities in place was no longer as solid as it had been:

[in Eastern Europe] Large numbers of Jews, of whom only a tiny fraction were intellectuals in any sense of the word, had decided to seek new avenues of fulfillment and gratification outside the pale of what rabbinic authority had regarded as legitimate.⁵³

The processes of modernization that Cohen identifies begin with the effects of Enlightenment on all levels among European Jews, whereby traditional bonds of community began to weaken.⁵⁴ Cohen suggests that the search for new community structures for Jewish life was the central force driving European Jewish history from within, during the 19th and 20th centuries:

Indeed, the inner history of all European Jewry in the 19th and 20th c. can be summed up as a series of efforts to find a substitute for the Jewish communal framework which had first disintegrated in consequence of internal Jewish revolt and which then had to contend with mounting physical attack from the outside and progressive spiritual defection from within.⁵⁵

⁵² Gerson Cohen, "German Jewry as Mirror of Modernity," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 20 (1975): xxii.

⁵³ "Mirror" xxi.

⁵⁴ In *Rethinking Modern Judaism*, Arnold Eisen argues that Emancipation rather than Enlightenment was the leading force for change.

⁵⁵ "Mirror" xxii.

The creative solutions Jews arrived at to the challenges of modernity differed depending on the nature of the societies that they lived in. In Eastern Europe, certainly after the Russian pogroms of the 1880s, the option of emulating the Russians or Poles who lived beyond the ghettos, and of assimilating into their communities, was not strong. There was no way, for example, that the Jews could become part of the Russian aristocracy, there was not a middle class to aspire to, and the masses were unappealing to all but the ideologically motivated. In any case, the Christian populations of Eastern Europe were anything but welcoming to the Jews:

It is, I believe, fair to say that the overwhelming number of Jews perceived the East European environment as one of implacable hostility. In a society where pogrom and wanton oppression had become policies of state, socio-political meliorism was a pipe dream.⁵⁶

For Eastern European Jews, the alternatives were to immigrate, or to make the social and political choice of strengthening their Orthodoxy, thus making a statement and taking a position on the enduring value of a way of life that was being challenged by the forces of change. Alternatively, they could move in the other direction, away from religion, and become part of a revolutionary movement with a powerful new narrative, “some form of *secular* messianism or nationalism – Socialist, Communist, Zionist, Yiddishist.”⁵⁷ In Germany, the situation was very different. German goals for cultural renewal paralleled those of the Jews in their midst, so that the Jews could and did identify with and feel part of a German collective identity.

In Germany the Jews encountered a Gentile group that aspired to culture and sought to get the Jew to absorb that culture. ... While Jews in Germany were seeking to restore the vitality of their tradition by reform and reformulation, by the reconquest of a healthy past that would sustain a pride in a present and future open with potential, at that very time Germans – Deists, Christians, Romantics, Idealists – were engaged in the very same quest for Germany. ... Whatever else

⁵⁶ “Mirror” xxii.

⁵⁷ “Mirror” xxiii.

German Jews sought to be as Jews, they passionately sought to be urbane Jews and urbane Germans, loyal and dignified *citizens* with a distinct identity as Jews.⁵⁸

Jewish thinkers were re-envisioning Jewish life in the categories of Western thought. These new formulations were appealing to both the German and the Jewish identities within individual German Jews themselves, and were also accessible to such German intellectuals as were interested. At the same time, the scholars who formulated Reform Judaism, as well as those of the Historical and neo-Orthodox schools, focused their research on traditional Jewish sources, which remained the ground on which renewal was built:

... each school of scholar-theologians – Reform, Historical, Orthodox – sought to pinpoint and describe the structure of rabbinic faith and literature, and thereby to gain not only new insight into the sources themselves but the foundations for legitimatising their respective religious responses to the contemporary world.⁵⁹

Denominational Judaism has become the norm in the Western Ashkenazic Jewish world, though it did not develop in the Sephardic and Mizrachi countries, mostly though not all Islamic, nor in Eastern Europe, where the processes of modernization and interaction with host societies developed differently.

“

The three Jewish denominations that began in post-Enlightenment Germany addressed questions of community, identity and the relationship with the past in the context of modernity, including secular learning and citizenship. These same questions were taken on anew in America by Mordecai Kaplan. The passion with which Kaplan devoted himself to the task was deeply rooted in his family background and early life, including a personal journey from complete acceptance of the Orthodox view of Biblical truth that he grew up with, to questioning, and then rejecting that view.

⁵⁸ “Mirror” xxiii.

⁵⁹ “Mirror” xxvi.

II.2.1 Kaplan and Community

The formulation that Mordecai Kaplan arrived at to encapsulate his vision of Jewish life in America was “Living in Two Civilizations.” This goal was in some ways similar to the one that German Jews had had, to be engaged and contributing citizens of the nation state and equally to live fully as Jews. However, Kaplan saw both Jewish life and citizenship in the nation-state quite differently than the German Jews had.

Basic to Kaplan’s thinking on Jewish community was the insight with which he credits his continued commitment to Jewish life at a point in his early career when he was prepared to abandon it. What he called his “Copernican Revolution” happened when he became convinced that the model of duty that was so often used to oblige Jews to observe should be inverted. Jews were not supposed to serve Judaism but rather, the Jewish religion existed to nourish, challenge and inspire the Jewish people.⁶⁰ The story as he tells it in *Judaism as a Civilization* affords a snapshot of the young Kaplan struggling with inner doubt, triumphing and setting out on his path as teacher at the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he would remain for 53 years (1910-1963) to stimulate and inspire a generation of students, including Lavy Becker.

It was undoubtedly in a spirit of naïveté that as a young man I accepted the pulpit of an influential Orthodox congregation in New York City. As soon as I found myself drifting away from the traditional interpretation of Judaism, and could no longer conscientiously preach and teach according to Orthodox doctrine, I made up my mind to leave the rabbinate. Just as I was about to turn to some other pursuit, I was invited by the Jewish Theological Seminary to take charge of its newly established department for training teachers for religious schools. I seized the opportunity to remain in Jewish work, because I was quite certain that the Jewish ideology which had begun to take shape in my mind was calculated to win and hold the youth. I was confirmed in this belief by the fact that the invitation to head the Teachers Institute came from Dr. Schechter right after he heard me read a paper before the Alumni of the Jewish Theological Seminary. In that paper I developed the thesis that the future of Judaism demanded that all Jewish teaching and practical activity be based on the proposition that the Jewish religion existed

⁶⁰ The comment could be made that Kaplan’s statement contains a polemical distortion, since classically Jews do *not* serve Judaism, they serve God. The strength of the insight as Kaplan himself experienced it, however, is not in doubt.

for the Jewish people and not the Jewish religion for the Jewish people. That thesis marked a Copernican revolution in my understanding of Judaism.⁶¹

Kaplan's doubts about the traditional interpretation of Judaism had to do with his inability to believe in the Biblical miracles and supernatural revelation. The seeds of doubt had been sown with his introduction to Biblical criticism at home, at the hands of Arnold Ehrlich, whom Kaplan's father had engaged to help his son with his doubts and questions by studying Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed*. It was young Kaplan's own ongoing doubts and the soul-searching they led to that stimulated him to seek a new approach to Jewish life.

Years of thought and struggle resulted in the publication in 1934 of *Judaism as a Civilization*, Kaplan's major statement of his program for Jewish life. Central to this program was Kaplan's insistence that Judaism had to be understood as a civilization and not just a religion. Human civilizations were the products of human communities and tapped their deepest wellsprings of creativity, stimulating a range of cultural products. These included representations of the Divine, religious systems, languages, codes of ethics and law, dance, music and rich bodies of custom. This is the vision within which Kaplan's statement about the Jewish religion existing to serve the Jewish people is set. He insisted that, like all civilizations, the Jewish one had evolved over the millennia and needed to continue to evolve in order to remain alive, flowing, creative and responsive to its people and time. Kaplan divided Jewish history into three previous civilizations: the Ancient ("henotheistic"); Biblical (theocratic) and Rabbinic ("other-worldly"). It had become time, he argued, for the next stage, in which the immanence of God in the human heart would co-exist with an updated reading of Biblical story and a complex, social and political organization that would support Jews in this new stage of creative evolution.

Judaism is now on the threshold of a fourth stage in its development and the civilization into which it will grow will be humanistic and spiritual. In discussing the program for Jewish life in the modern world it will become evident that the next phase of Jewish civilization will constitute, in some respects, a return on a

⁶¹ *Judaism as a Civilization* (JAC), xxx [this is the correct page number, in Roman numerals from the front matter].

higher level to the first stage; the center of gravity of the spiritual interests will again be the here and the now, and communion with God will again be a possible normal experience for the Jew. Instead, however, of being an outward visible experience, communion with God will be realized in the inwardness of mind and heart.⁶²

This passage is important because it carries forward Kaplan's idea of Judaism as an *evolving* religious civilization and also because it speaks of God in an open and direct way. Kaplan's aversion to supernaturalism often led him to seek new formulations that would make clear the break with what he saw as outdated God-concepts and push people's thinking and experiencing in new directions. Instead of saying "God," he preferred formulations that emphasized process and immanence as in, for example, "the power that makes for salvation." For people who understood what Kaplan was getting at, this was fine but many others misunderstood completely and characterized Kaplan as an atheist. Such misrepresentations hurt the Reconstructionist movement and were felt as well in Lavy's shul, as documented in the "We Were *Treif*" section of Chapter 5.

Like the civilizational element noted above, the other two components in Kaplan's characterization of Judaism as an "evolving religious civilization" were essential to his vision. Although religion was not the only cultural creation of the Jewish people, he saw it as the greatest: Jewish life would be unimaginable, Kaplan insisted, without the Jewish religion. However, the religion had in the past adapted to changing worldviews in different epochs and needed to continue to do so. A religion, like a civilization, that could not evolve would die. Kaplan did not believe in the divine authority of revealed Biblical truth, so he saw it as incumbent upon maximally educated and informed Jews to play a conscious role in the evolution of the Jewish religion as it moved into its fourth stage.

⁶²JAC, 214.

The notion of an “evolving religious civilization” was predicated on the understanding that Jews would be living with other Jews in “organic community,” generating the collective creativity upon which cultural evolution depends. “Organic community” was an important term in Kaplan’s vocabulary, closely related to his idea of “civilization.” For both terms, the main idea was that meaningful Jewish life needed to include many dimensions, all of which were inter-related and all of which were necessary. Although, as documented in Chapter 6 below, just what Kaplan meant by “organic community” was not clear to all within the Reconstructionist movement, his idea of a complex social system or ecology in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts is not unfamiliar today:

For the purposes of planning a program, we may identify separate elements of Jewish civilization. Language is a vehicle of the group memories and devotions, literature and other arts their storehouse. Law and mores are the social cement among contemporaries and generate the sense of continuity with preceding generations. The religious elements of a civilization constitute the sanctions of the ideals and purposes of the group. They heighten the values of the civilization and protect it against absorption or destruction. But though these elements are distinguishable, they are organically related to each other, and *the organic character of Judaism is the crucial fact about it*. The pattern of each part determines the whole. A program of Jewish life must enable Jews to see and live Judaism steadily, organically and completely. No single Jewish activity or interest can serve for the whole of Judaism.⁶³

It seems likely that Kaplan’s ideas about organic community were in part derived from his readings of Durkheim and other social theorists. It seems equally likely and certainly equally important, that these ideas arose in part from his own experience. Kaplan’s first years were spent in a *shtetl* where Jewish life was lived fully and holistically, as Gurock and Schacter’s biography describes:

Of course, living, as he recalled, in a homogeneous Jewish social environment, he had ‘no conflicts, no adjustments’ to make. In his ‘little town ... eight versts (which is about five miles) from a railroad station,’ Kaplan had almost no contact with Gentiles, save with Pavlova ‘who scrubbed our floors’ and with a Polish policeman who frequented his mother’s small store. For the young boy, ‘the idea of being a Jew was natural, normal and complete.’ He experienced the Jewish

⁶³ JAC, 218.

holidays, customs and traditions as a matter of life's course long before he formally explored the niceties of their legal details in the study hall.⁶⁴

It is important to note that such an experience of a full Jewish environment was shared at least in part by the first generation of immigrants to America, and by their young children because of the *shtetl*-like conditions that were reproduced in immigrant ghettos from New York to Montreal to Los Angeles. I would argue that Lavy Becker and many of the others (though not all) who joined him understood Kaplan's message immediately because they shared the bodily memories: the sights, sounds, smells and feelings, and also the values and mutual-help ethics characteristic of such communities.

In Kaplan's mind, there were two places where Judaism could be lived holistically as a civilization: Palestine and America, although in America Jews needed to learn to live simultaneously in two civilizations, the Jewish and the American. Kaplan's American vision was not unlike that of Horace Kallen, a Jew born in 1882 in Silesia and educated at Harvard, who became the leading exponent of ethnic pluralism in America. Kallen's "orchestra" metaphor portrayed each ethnic group as a different instrument, adding its special character to the harmonious whole.⁶⁵

In his view of Palestine, Kaplan was closest to his mentor Ahad Ha-Am. Kaplan was convinced of the regenerative power of Palestine as the spiritual and cultural wellspring and center of Jewish life, although as Scult demonstrates, he remained deeply committed to America and so somewhat ambivalent about the need for (American) Jews to live in the Holy Land. Unlike Kallen or Ahad Ha-Am, however, Kaplan was not a secularist and his primary vision was that of the evolving *religious* civilization of the Jewish people.

⁶⁴ *A Modern Heretic and a Traditional Community: Mordecai M. Kaplan, Orthodoxy, and American Judaism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 11.

⁶⁵ See Mel Scult *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993) 312.

Kaplan maintained that the integration of Jews as part of modern nation states had stripped them of their political autonomy, of the “corporate status” they had had in the pre-modern world. In order to live fully in what was still basically a Christian America, Jews – and other groups – had to claim their right to the religious freedom to live their traditions fully as civilizations. Only thus could they create the kind of community that could give meaning to the fact of being a Jew. In his day, Kaplan found an unacceptable lack of such community:

The lack of corporate status puts Jews in the category of foundlings left, as it were, by fate upon the doorstep of the nations that they might take pity on them, and provide them with food and shelter. To be a Jew under these circumstances is not conducive to peace of mind, nor compatible with human dignity and moral stamina. It is impossible for the Jew to be true to himself, or to the part for which life has cast him, so long as he does not know to what kind of group he belongs as a Jew.⁶⁶

Jews could not or should not wait passively for the nation state to create for them the network of self-regulating, intergenerational, intermediate communities they needed. Indeed, Kaplan’s whole project was aimed at convincing world Jewry to reorganize Jewish life so as to create a diverse international network, with Israel as its central hub, within which Jews of all kinds throughout the world would be able to thrive and to live ethically and creatively as Jews, a concept symbolized in the Reconstructionist movement logo (see Figure 10). Kaplan’s project of a new Covenant that would bind the whole of the Jewish people was never realized, though he continued to try to make it happen. Because of Lavy Becker’s work for the World Jewish Congress, Kaplan hoped at one point that his former student would be able to help realize the goal of re-constituting world Jewry (see below on page 232).

* * *

By the time *Judaism as a Civilization* was published in 1934, Kaplan had attracted a core group who were convinced that he had a crucial message for Jews about the renewal of Jewish life

⁶⁶ JAC, 231.

and Jewish community in America. This core group was headed by Ira Eisenstein, the man who would marry Kaplan's daughter Judith and who would form a lifetime friendship with Lavy Becker, starting during their years as students at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

The publication of Kaplan's major statement in book form allowed the core group to begin organizing study groups to explore his ideas. Lavy Becker writes that he had started "immediately" when *Judaism as a Civilization* came out in 1934, to organize "two study groups to use the book as a text," and adds "They may have been the first in the country."⁶⁷ These kinds of study groups expressed Reconstructionist values in the intensity of their focus on ideas and the evolution of Jewish life. They also offered an alternative form of community, something that became of increasing interest when the post-Second World War climate of prosperity and consumerism led to the building of big, showy synagogues.

II.2.2 Practical Aspects: The Reconstructionist movement's connection with community through *havurot*

In his article "Seeds of Community: The Role of the Reconstructionist Movement in Creating Havurot in America," Peter Margolis examines "the Reconstructionist contribution to the *havurah* as an American Jewish institution from the inception of the Reconstructionist movement in the 1920s to the establishment of the first contemporary *havurot* [...] in the late 1960s."⁶⁸ Margolis establishes the importance Kaplan attributed to small Reconstructionist study groups addressing themselves to vital issues of Jewish life and survival. The zest for

⁶⁷ "The Influence of Mordecai M. Kaplan, z"l: part five." *The Reconstructionist*. (July-August 1984) 25.

Becker returns to this subject in the interview he did with Barry Lazar for the Lazar/Beitel movie made on the occasion of the synagogue's 36th birthday.

"Kaplan published his first book called *Judaism as a Civilization*. Immediately, within my congregation, I started a study group with about 15 or 16 or 17 people, that carried on for a couple of years while I was still in that area of New York. I also started two study groups, one within the congregation and one with people in the community but who were not members of the congregation. This was possible because there were other congregations. The neighbourhood where I lived, which was known as Sunnyside, was an area to which many people, academics, people in the arts, writers, etc., lived, and were thinking people, and who were prepared to come to the Jewish study course which we all shared. Some of the Jewish social workers of that day, in the organizations in NYC, which was headquarters for most of the large, national bodies were there. The point basically was that apparently I needed that kind of thing."

⁶⁸ *YIVO Annual* 23 (1996) 319.

Jewish life and fearless intelligence of these Jews was intended to act as “yeast” or “leaven” in the broader Jewish community, demonstrating just how lively and relevant Judaism could be. Margolis credits two important articles in *The Reconstructionist* magazine with leading a resurgence of interest in new forms of committed community and with the introduction of the term “*havurah*” into popular contemporary usage.

The initial articles by Petuchowski (1960) and Neusner (1961) were welcomed by Ira Eisenstein as editor and then reinforced by him through editorial comment, as the *haburah* or *havurah* became an integral part of Reconstructionist thinking. Neusner gave the keynote speech on “The Place of the *Habura* in the Reconstructionist Movement” at the second annual conference in White Plains, New York, in April of 1961; the *havurah* was again featured at the third annual Conference in Skokie in 1962. The degree to which the *havurah* had become integral to movement thinking is further reflected in the Reconstructionist pamphlet first published in the early 1960s, entitled *The Havurah Idea*, and in a name change for the Federation:

[...] when the seminal articles by Petuchowski and Neusner popularized the name, the Reconstructionist fellowships in existence immediately called themselves “*havurot*.” So complete was the identification with the *havurah* idea among Reconstructionists that the movement’s organizational branch, founded in 1959 as the Reconstructionist Fellowship of Congregations, changed its name in 1960 to the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and *Havurot* (FRCH)
...⁶⁹

Ira Eisenstein followed up the Petuchowski and Neusner articles with a series of editorials in *The Reconstructionist* promoting the *havurah* idea. The following citation shows Eisenstein’s desire to reach and involve Jewish intellectuals by offering them an attractive alternative to what he and others denigrated as the empty ostentation of the new big synagogues:

We wonder whatever happened to our intellectuals, why are they not in the synagogue? The answer should be obvious: they are neither rich enough nor

⁶⁹ “Seeds of Community,” 321.

acquiescent enough to be accepted by or to accept the congregation under the 'curse of bigness'."⁷⁰

Margolis mentions the *havurot* that began to spring up, in late 1961 in California and Louisiana, then in New York, Chicago, Denver and Los Angeles but he does not mention the Montreal group. This omission is difficult to understand, since Lavy Becker was closely involved with Kaplan, Eisenstein and the movement. It is possible that Margolis suffered from a kind of "Canada blindness" that sometimes afflicts American scholars of Jewish life, but there may be another explanation.

The Petuchowski and Neusner articles and *The Havurah Idea* pamphlet illustrate different dimensions of the "quest for community" in the first two decades following the Second World War. Both scholars look back to the crisis of community in the days before and during the Second Temple period in Jerusalem, and to the brotherhoods that arose in those days, for inspiration.

Writing from the perspective of Reform Judaism, Petuchowski struggles with what he sees as his movement's failures. These include a shift from the "piety of the community" to the "piety of the individual," where personal conviction and individual commitment were to have created pious individuals who could function anywhere in the post-Emancipation world. Traditional practices were seen to be less important than the "essence" of Judaism. "Yet determination of what the 'essence' of Judaism really was has remained a moot point from the beginning," and so, in the long run,

... notwithstanding some notable exceptions, the creation of the "pious individual" is a task in which Reform Judaism did *not* succeed. On the contrary, whereas Reform Judaism originally envisaged a Jewish piety without a Jewish environment, what, in point of fact, has come about is the Jewish environment without a Jewish piety.⁷¹

⁷⁰ "Seeds of Community," 342.

⁷¹ "Toward a Modern 'Brotherhood'" *The Reconstructionist* (December 16, 1960), 15.

The Jewish environment without piety referred to here is the large, costly synagogue, so concerned with running itself as an institution that worthwhile Jewish values are neglected. The synagogue had become a Jewish environment that people would come to and go from but that left individuals without any way to connect to real Jewish community. As does Neusner in his 1961 article, Petuchowski cites the warning issued by Moses Maimonides not to separate oneself from the community.

He who withdraws from the ways of the community, even though he does not commit any transgressions, but merely separates himself from the congregation of Israel, and performs the commandments not in their midst, ... such a one has no share in the World-to-Come.⁷²

Petuchowski finds the answer to this dilemma in a precedent for 'self-imposed' authority set in the 6th century BCE by the returning exiles from Babylonia to Jerusalem. As a contemporary example of this, Petuchowski cites Kaplan's desire to formulate a common set of self-imposed obligations by reconstituting the Jewish people, but deems it unrealistic:

As a matter of fact, Dr. Mordecai Kaplan has frequently made the suggestion, indeed the earnest plea, that the Jewish People today, in some formal way, reconstitute itself by a renewal of the Covenant. The suggestion is appealing. Its execution, however, is unrealistic.⁷³

Rather than seek an unreachable consensus on self-imposed obligations from *all* Jews, Petuchowski suggests using the Pharisaic precedent as a model for setting up "Brotherhoods" as congregations or within congregations. The piety that these intimate groupings with their self-imposed standards demonstrated, could set the example for others to follow:

I am referring to the *haburot*, the Pharisaic "brotherhoods," organized in the days of the Second Temple. These "brotherhoods," represented those Jews who made the ritual laws more stringent for themselves, and who became more particular and meticulous in the observance of the laws governing diet and levitical purity than was the current Jewish practice of their time. ... [who] maintained their own superior standards, and ... [had] rigorous 'entrance requirements.'

The "exclusivism" of the Pharisaic Separatists, their 'setting themselves apart' from the rest of the people, may indicate a tendency at variance with the pull of

⁷² "Brotherhood," 12.

⁷³ "Brotherhood," 18.

‘other-directed’ conformity which we identify with the essence of our democratic way of life. But it remains to be pointed out that, ultimately, the Separatists won over the people as a whole. Their particular interpretation of the Law ... became, in the course of time, the *norm* of Jewish piety for everyone alike.⁷⁴

Just over a month after Petuchowski’s article “Toward a Modern ‘Brotherhood’” appeared in the *Reconstructionist*, editor Ira Eisenstein published Jacob Neusner’s article “Fellowship and the Crisis of Community.” For Neusner, this article came at the beginning of an in-depth examination of Fellowships, which would result in three separate books, published in 1963, 1970 and 1972.⁷⁵ In writing about “the crisis of community and the advent [...] of the radically isolated individual as the basic unit of society” he echoes the concerns of Robert Nisbet, who wrote the Preface to the first of Neusner’s explorations of the subject, *Fellowship in Judaism: the First Century and Today*. Nisbet’s preface situates Neusner’s study as a response to broad societal questions:

What Dr. Neusner has to say about the role of the religious fellowship in first-century Pharisaic Judaism is fruitful and clarifying to those primarily interested in the history of Judaism [...] But the book is more than religious history. It is a perceptive essay in religious sociology [...] as instructive to those concerned with the problem of community and association as it is to religious historians. [...] finally, the book should be regarded as a profound essay in meaning for our own time. [...] We too find ourselves living in what Dr. Neusner calls a crisis of community.”⁷⁶

Neusner’s interest in Fellowship and Community was reciprocated by Ira Eisenstein. In the early 1960s, the Reconstructionist Press published a pamphlet called *The Havurah Idea*, bringing together an editorial by Eisenstein and an article by Neusner.⁷⁷ Eisenstein’s engagement with

⁷⁴ “Brotherhood,” 18-19.

⁷⁵ *Fellowship in Judaism: the First Century and Today* (London: Vallentine, Mitchell & Co. Ltd., 1963); *Judaism in the Secular Age: Essays on Fellowship, Community and Freedom* (London: Vallentine, Mitchell, 1970). *Contemporary Judaic Fellowship in Theory and Practice*, Jacob Neusner, ed. (New York, Ktav, 1972).

⁷⁶ *Fellowship in Judaism: the First Century and Today*. (London: Vallentine, Mitchell & Co. Ltd., 1963) 7.

⁷⁷ Jacob Neusner and Ira Eisenstein, *The Havurah Idea: A Reconstructionist Pamphlet* (New York: The Reconstructionist Press, undated [early 60s]). Neusner clearly thought that the Reconstructionists had the potential to bring some of this into being. However, at some point he appears to have become disillusioned. He doesn’t mention Reconstructionism at all in his Foreword to the book he edited on Reconstructionist Judaism: *Conserving Conservative Judaism: Reconstructionist Judaism*, (New York: Garland Pub, 1993). In *Judaism in Modern Times* (1995) he does not include Reconstructionism among the denominations in the “Judaisms” he features; the one mention he does make of it is in a distinctly nasty footnote. “Since a religious system begins in the social entity that it describes and defines, I ignore Reconstructionism, which has yet to form a distinctive social entity of consequence,

the *havurah* idea focused on the potential of such groups to act as “effective gadflies” to the larger community, responsible, alert and aware, “a sort of League of Jewish Voters, civic minded, conscientious and alert to the issues of the time, dedicated to arousing others to their responsibilities.”⁷⁸

Neusner saw fellowships as opportunities for Jews to engage personally and to contribute meaningfully, by contrast with the synagogue of the day, which Neusner characterizes as an “escape from responsibility,” where people were expected to contribute their “purse” rather than their “personality.” Fellowship would be different from friendship; it would transcend individual friendships by virtue of the ideals its members held in common. Personal engagement and commitment would again differentiate the fellowship from other kinds of Jewish organizations, no matter how worthy, where the highest level of personal involvement for most people happens during the coffee breaks:

What, indeed, does a private person do in a society? That is the key. My impression is that, mainly, the private person gives money and drinks tea. For example, the great Jewish organizations in this country carry out enormously important tasks in philanthropic and Zionist activity, or in defence, or in education. But what do the members do? Am I wrong in thinking that they do the following: they pay dues, contribute to special ‘drives’ or ‘campaigns’, receive ‘bulletins’ or communiqués, and very occasionally attend a meeting? ...”

What happens at a meeting? Generally, the members hear a speaker, perhaps ask a question, but mainly, look forward to the coffee hour afterward. This is quite legitimate, it seems to me, for the coffee hour is the one moment in which each private person actually does something creative and personal. [...] If each man knows and accepts the goal of the fellowship, and knows how he himself is achieving that goal personally, in his own being, then he will be more than a Lion or an Elk or a Benevolent Moose: he will be a Jew and a man.⁷⁹

comparable with Reform, Integrationist-Orthodox, segregationist Orthodox, and Conservative Judaisms. It remained a single-digit Judaism; its corpus of ideas is large but not dense, and it is expressed in language that is wooden and clumsy, **hardly a mark of a passionate response to an urgent question.** (emphasis mine)” It is decidedly odd that Reconstructionism should be so dismissed; many have trouble with Kaplan’s prose but none who knew him have denied his passion and sense of urgency.

⁷⁸ *Havurah Idea*, 13.

⁷⁹ *Havurah Idea*, 6.

Neusner's article is interesting both in its critique of the available options for Jewish community inside and outside the synagogue and for its exploration of the nature of engaged Jewish community based on historical precedent. On a different note, Neusner offers an intriguing description of and comment on the nature of fellowship, a description that evokes Buber's I/Thou moment, or perhaps the "collective effervescence" of Durkheim. In any case, this description of fellowship "happening" could well apply to much of the life of the community in "Lavy's Shul" as experienced and described by its members:

Fellowship is a dimension of time: [we] cannot say fellowship *is*, but rather, fellowship *happens*. [...] I cannot reveal the mystery of fellowship, for I do not know it. I can suggest, however, that we seek it not in mechanisms and artifices, but in the magic of a moment, in the miracle that occurs when men and women transcend themselves.⁸⁰

Neusner's description of fellowship here is almost mystical, but in this it is not typical of his article, nor of Reconstructionist thinking at this time. As Margolis writes, second-generation Jews like Kaplan, or Lavy Becker, or, we might add, others like Ira Eisenstein, all of whom were rooted in the Eastern European Orthodox immigrant community and who came to maturity before the Second World War, were concerned with finding ways to be good Jews, authentic Jews, outside of traditional practice. The issues were quite different for the generation born after the war:

[...] it must be remembered that finding an authentic Jewish alternative to religious traditionalism was the Jewish issue par excellence for [...] second-generation Jews, just as rediscovering Jewish spirituality inspired a later generation to form *havurot*. Further, the intellectual tenor of the 1930s was informed by a still-intact faith in modern science and rationalism; the generation of the contemporary *havurot* viewed their world from a postmodernist perspective colored by the Holocaust and nuclear threat.⁸¹

The analysis Margolis offers here is supported by the interviews and observations carried out at Montreal's Reconstructionist Synagogue. In particular, the generation-based distinction he

⁸⁰ *Havurah Idea*, 7-8.

⁸¹ "Seeds," 328-9.

makes is important to an understanding of the “Lavy’s Shul” community and will be developed in the next section.

II.2.3 A new generation, a new outlook, a different kind of *havurah*

There are distinctions to be made between a Reconstructionist group like Lavy Becker’s, founded in 1960, or other contemporary Reconstructionist fellowships and *havurot*, and the counter-culture *havurot* founded by the post-war generation, starting in 1968 with Havurat Shalom. Both kinds were, in a sense, counter-culture, but generational differences that included style and aesthetics separated them.

Eric Caplan cites an interview with Art Green, in which Green distances his founding of Havurat Shalom from the Reconstructionist *havurot*, in no uncertain terms:

The Reconstructionist *havurot* were already older people. They were very staid, and from our point of view, bourgeois. We were sort of late 60s counterculture types. We had friends who lived in communes in the woods. Some of us were actively involved in the anti-war movement. And the theology of the *havurah* was very much neo-Hasidic. It was a combination of Heschel and Buber. ... Kaplan and Reconstructionism was something we thought about not at all. ... As we experienced it, we were doing something new that did not depend on those things [the Reconstructionist *havurot*]. And certainly we never had any contact with or felt any closeness to anything going on in the Reconstructionist movement.⁸²

The kind of antipathy that Green expresses, the desire not to be considered as part of the Reconstructionist élan, indicates that there is an identity boundary involved. This divide would appear to be the kind that naturally occurs when a new generation needs to distinguish itself from the previous one. But the differences between the two go deeper. It seems clear that the two parallel kinds of *havurot*, the Reconstructionist and the baby boom counter-culture, were the heirs respectively to quite different approaches to Jewish life, as embodied in the persons

⁸² Eric Caplan, *From Ideology to Liturgy: Reconstructionist Worship and American Liberal Judaism* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2002) 133, note 45. For a graphic portrayal of what Art Green was talking about, see Figure 7 and Figure 8.

and teaching of Mordecai Kaplan and Abraham Joshua Heschel at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

In addition to contrasts in personality, the differences these two men personified can be seen to be rooted in their dissimilar European backgrounds as well as in their different generational perspectives. Although we may suppose that each *havurah* or fellowship that was founded in the 60s and 70s had its own identity, having to do with where it was located and who its members were, the Kaplan and Heschel streams represent the poles that define a territory.⁸³

Kaplan was born in 1881 into a stream of rationalist/ethical and Zionist tendencies in Enlightenment-influenced Lithuania and immigrated as a child to America.⁸⁴ The challenges of adapting to America faced by the Eastern European Orthodox community were his challenges. He was 33 when the First World War began and 38 when it ended, and his school of thought makes reference to the re-constructive efforts required following the Great War.

Heschel was born in Warsaw in 1907, a generation later, descended from seven generations of Polish *hasidim*. Heschel encountered and incorporated modern ideas after moving to Germany, where he obtained a doctorate from the Institute for the Scientific Study of Judaism in Berlin. He was deported from Germany to Poland in 1933 and came to the United States by way of England at the age of 33. Neil Gillman contrasts the two men succinctly and convincingly and then argues that what they shared was the fact that each was a product of his times.

⁸³ The best source of information on counter-culture *havurot* is probably Riv-Ellen Prell's *Prayer and Community: The Havurah in American Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989). There is also some information in Eric Caplan's study of Reconstructionist prayer, *op. cit.* As well, a "comprehensive statement on what a *havurah* is and how to start one" by Burt Jacobson, an early member of Havurat Shalom, is given in *The First Jewish Catalog* (Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973). In addition, Chava Weissler's study of the "Dutchville Minyan" *Making Judaism Meaningful: Ambivalence and Tradition in a Havurah Community* (New York: AMS Press, Inc. 1989) offers an ethnographic portrait of a *havurah* community.

⁸⁴ Mel Scult's biography of Kaplan traces Kaplan's roots through his father back to Israel Lipkin (Salanter) and the *musar* movement in Lithuania. Kaplan himself received ordination from the Orthodox Rabbi Reines. See also the *Jewish Encyclopaedia* entries on Reines and Israel Lipkin.

In many ways, Heschel was 'the polar opposite of Kaplan. Kaplan's temperament was rational and scientific; Heschel's, mystical and Hasidic. Kaplan was meticulously groomed; Heschel had the rumpled look of a romantic poet, his face deeply lined (at least in his later years), bearded, and crowned with an unruly shock of hair. Kaplan's spoken English was dry and unaccented; Heschel's, lilting and touched with a Yiddish accent. Kaplan wrote straightforward expository prose; Heschel wrote poetically and impressionistically. Kaplan's thought was radical and revolutionary; Heschel's, a restatement of classical biblical and rabbinic Judaism, albeit with a strong mystical strain and in a fully modern idiom. Kaplan advocated a reconsideration of religious practice; Heschel pleaded for a return to traditional forms.

But just as Kaplan was a product of his times, so was Heschel. Kaplan's challenge was to reread Judaism so that it could survive the challenge of the modern West. Heschel's was to speak to a generation whose faith in the modern West had been irreparably shattered by the Holocaust.⁸⁵

The generational and cultural difference between the two kinds of *havurot* that were Kaplan's and Heschel's legacies respectively stands out clearly in the photographs reproduced here as Figure 7 and Figure 8. Figure 7 is from Dedication Day, 1967, when Montreal's Reconstructionist Synagogue formally inaugurated its new shul building. We see the synagogue building and the informality of its structure, with its simple folding chairs and lack of a raised podium. At the same time, we see the dignitaries on hand and the general decorum of the proceedings, the women dressed in styles aspiring to the elegant modern chic that Jackie Kennedy had done so much to make popular since the start of her husband's presidency in 1960. The stylistic ideal might have been expressed in the terms Women's Group secretary Beatrice Brasloff used to describe the fold-over card selected to announce donations to a synagogue fund, that is, "simple in design, yet smart and in good taste." By contrast, Figure 8 shows the spirit of the new kind of baby boom *havurah* that was seeking fresh ways into the heart of the mystery of Judaism and Jewish survival. The photograph of boys and girls dancing barefoot in a circle on the grass is from the inside front cover of the *Jewish Catalog*, and speaks volumes about the "new generation with a new explanation." The book's dedication mentions

⁸⁵ Neil Gillman. *Conservative Judaism: The New Century* 1996, Behrman House, Inc.

the house in Massachusetts that was the home of Havurat Shalom and also a cat named, in the religiously experimental and exploratory spirit of this generation, “Krishna”:

to an old rambling yellow house in Somerville, Mass.
to Krishna Kat
to those who daven and study there,
eat together
argue and love; to Havurat Shalom

Despite allowances made for the different kinds of occasions portrayed in the two photographs in Figure 7 and Figure 8, the fact that a cultural watershed divided the generations emerges clearly from these images of the two kinds of *havurot*, pre- and post-baby boom.

The contrasting approaches embodied in Kaplan and Heschel would eventually mix together in the life of Montreal’s Reconstructionist synagogue and throughout the Reconstructionist movement. The Reconstructionist Rabbinical assembly would devote an issue of its journal *Raayonot* (Summer 1983) to “*Havurot* and Reconstructionism”, in which both kinds of *havurot* are discussed. In 1984, the movement would host a seminar on the theme of “Neo-Hasidism and Reconstructionism” and then, in 2003, Reconstructionists would constitute a significant segment of the audience at a seminar held in New York, entitled *Awakening, Yearning, and Renewal: Conference on the Hasidic Roots of Contemporary Jewish Spiritual Expression*.⁸⁶ However, when Lavy Becker founded his community in 1960, Heschel’s post-war disciples, including Havurat Shalom founder Arthur Green, were still too young to be starting their own *havurot*, the Kaplan/Heschel divide was still clear, and the goals that Lavy Becker set for his group were highly resonant with the *Havurah Idea* as

⁸⁶“Awakening, Yearning and Renewal: A Conference on the Hasidic Roots of Contemporary Jewish Spiritual Expression and Festival of Neo-Hasidic Spirituality.” Conference held at the Jewish Community Center, Manhattan: March 26-28, 2003.

expressed by the Reconstructionist movement.⁸⁷ Although he was not able—nor really interested—to help realize Mordecai Kaplan’s grand vision of reconstituting world Jewry, Lavy Becker’s goals for his shul do fit within the Kaplanian world view of Jewish community as outlined above. Based on his own experience from childhood on, Becker believed deeply in the benefits of shul life as a form of Jewish community that could help Jews find salvation, or to use one of his own favourite terms, “fulfillment.”⁸⁸ It would be a source of fulfillment to Lavy Becker himself that he was able to help those who joined his shul in just this way.

* * *

As outlined above, the modern nation state posed challenges in the associative realm for people both within and outside the Jewish world in Europe. The loss of an independent Jewish polity and of self-regulating institutions like guilds and parishes left people bereft of community. Mordecai Kaplan responded to this situation as it persisted in America with a complex program designed to renew Jewish life, a program detailed in *Judaism as a Civilization*. Following publication of this book in 1934 Kaplan’s followers, including Lavy Becker, were in a position to help “spread the word” by organizing study groups. The need for intimate, engaged Jewish community intensified as postwar prosperity ushered in an age of consumer spending, including large and showy synagogues. Already committed to study groups and fellowships, the Reconstructionist movement was responsible for re-

⁸⁷ Mel Scult cites Heschel’s tribute to Kaplan from the latter’s 90th birthday dinner. It is lovely: “Kaplan takes Judaism personally. It is a magnificent obsession with him. I have a suspicion that just as the mystics of old used to stay up at midnight worrying about the *Shekhina*, he stays up at midnight doing *Tikkun Hatzot* [a midnight vigil] and worrying about the Jewish people.” (cited in *Judaism Meets the 20th Century*, p. 15)

⁸⁸ In *Judaism as a Civilization*, Kaplan argued against synagogues that would be solely worship-based, too narrow a focus for the multi-dimensional lives real Jews, as real people, needed to live. He argued instead for the concept of the synagogue as part of a Jewish community center, as did others (see David Kaufman’s *Shul With a Pool: The “Synagogue-Center”* in *American Jewish History*. Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1999). As Chapter 5 illustrates, Montreal’s Reconstructionist Synagogue took to heart the notion that a shul community was about more than just worship.

introducing the term *havurah* into contemporary Jewish life. Lavy Becker was part of the action in this phase of the movement and yet, as I will argue in Chapter 4, the group that he would found in 1960 was not purely a Reconstructionist *havurah* but rather a hybrid form, part synagogue, part informal *havurah*. The reasons for this are embedded in Lavy Becker's life path, starting with his early life in Montreal's downtown Jewish community. The next chapter traces this life path from downtown up until the inauguration of a small group and its quick evolution to synagogue status.

Chapter Three

III “My Father’s Nusach”: Lavy Becker, from Downtown Jew to Bergen Belsen After the War to the Bicentennial of Jews in Canada and Founding a Synagogue

The previous chapter has explored and reflected on some aspects of the themes of memory, identity, community and narrative and has also presented the principal meanings of “community” within Reconstructionism. The remaining chapters portray the community that was “Lavy’s Shul” by focusing on Lavy Becker and those who joined him; on the Reconstructionist philosophy that offered the group a framework within which to improvise; and the moment in time, a watershed between the modern and the post-modern periods, in which they all met.

Holding this “portrait” together is Lavy Becker. It is his life path which led to his founding of the synagogue. Inextricably intertwined with Lavy Becker’s life path are the life and times of the collectivities, the large communities of identity into which Becker was born: the evolving Jewish world including the birth of the State of Israel and the developing urban, provincial and national polities in Canada.

III.1 Background and Early Years

III.1.1 Quebec’s “Third Solitude”

The years from when he was born in 1905 until he left to study at the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1926 were formative for Lavy Becker as a growing individual. This same period saw Montreal’s Jewish community, and the city as a whole, grow and change.

Between 1881 and 1914, some 2.5 million Jews fled poverty, violence and repression in Eastern Europe, the majority landing in New York and spreading through the United States. These immigrants also swelled the ranks of Montreal’s Jewish community and transformed it. The fewer than two thousand Jews who had settled in Montreal prior to 1901 and were well

integrated into the Anglo-Protestant middle class, were suddenly confronted with a tripling of their numbers thanks to the arrival of Jews from Eastern Europe who were culturally very different from them: poor, speaking no English or French for the most part, having Yiddish as their mother tongue. What the “uptown” Jews were less able to see was the wealth of determination, ideas, ideologies, community spirit and creativity that the immigrants brought, and that changed the character not only of Montreal’s Jewish community but of the city and its ethnic balance as well.

In 1901, thanks to this wave of immigration from Eastern Europe, Jews became the city’s third largest ethnic group, after the French and Anglo-Celtic, a position they maintained each year until 1961, when the Italian population more than tripled in size and subsequently overtook the Jews in numbers.⁸⁹ It was, then, the Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants, a group that wanted to integrate into Canadian society but that also wanted to retain its culture and identity, that first challenged Quebec to confront a multicultural reality in an era when official “multiculturalism” had not yet been invented.

The first decades of the twentieth century were also years of major shifts in the structure of life in the Dominion of Canada. In 1905, the year of Lavy Becker’s birth, the two new provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta were added, thanks in good measure to the success of Minister of the Interior Clifford Sifton’s campaign to give farmers incentives to settle the West. During these years, there was tension between a desire to import immigrants who would efficiently and cheaply do the work of building the railways and opening new territory for agriculture – and the wish to bring in “the right kind” of people, who would maintain the British character

⁸⁹ 1901: 6,979; 1911: 28,895; 1921: 45,927; 1931: 58,099; 1941: 64,122; 1951: 80,829; 1961: 102,726. Louis Rosenberg *Changes in the Geographical Distribution of the Jewish Population of Metropolitan Montreal in the Decennial Periods from 1901 to 1961 & the Estimated Possible Changes during the Period from 1961 to 1971. A Preliminary Study.* (Montreal: Bureau of Social and Economic Research, Canadian Jewish Congress, 1966) 5.

of the country. Not only Jews, but also Italians, Blacks and “Orientals” were not considered to be the right kind.⁹⁰

At the same time as the government policy of giving away land to would-be farmers was sending people out into the countryside, and increasingly following the First World War, industrialization and urbanization were pulling people in the other direction, changing the character of work and of community. Exploitative working conditions in new industries gave rise to the union movement and Montreal’s Jews were involved, especially in the garment industry, where many Jews were amongst the most militant, often rising up against Jewish bosses who had arrived earlier and “made it.”⁹¹

The interwar years were those during which Montreal’s Jewish immigrant community most intensively constructed what Quebec sociologist Fernand Dumont calls its “référence,” its conscious sense of itself, created with the help of the different cultural products, from poetry and song to community institutions, that structure the identity of a collectivity. This process was ongoing among Quebec’s francophones, as it was in English for the rest of Canada. That the process of national identity construction took place separately for the English and the French in Canada led to the situation captured in the famous title of novelist Hugh MacLennan’s *Two Solitudes* and is one of the major cultural differences between Canada and the United States. Historian Gerald Tulchinsky has articulated in the scholarly arena what novelist Gwethlyn Graham first described in 1944 in *Earth and High Heaven*, the idea that the Yiddish-

⁹⁰ It would be a mistake to suggest that all forms of British identity, in Britain or in Canada, necessarily involved anti-Semitism. While the attitudes of key immigration officials and others with influence among the Canadian elites were anti-Semitic, Britain had been a haven for Jews since the Inquisition. A distinguished lineage of successfully acculturated Jewish leaders played prominent roles in British public life and this model of elite Jews also existed in Canada. In Montreal the De Sola family, William Sebag-Montefiore, the Harts and Josephs were examples. See Michael Brown *Jew or Juif?: Jews, French Canadians, and Anglo-Canadians, 1759-1914* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1987). On the other hand, for a brilliant depiction of the anti-Semitism running through the British upper class see Mordecai Richler’s *Solomon Gursky was Here* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 2002) especially Sir Hyman Kaplansky’s banquet scene, p. 506 ff.

⁹¹ See Israel Medres *Between the Wars: Canadian Jews in Transition* (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 2003) 34-6 and Gerald Tulchinsky *Branching Out: The Transformation of the Canadian Jewish Community* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1998) 93-116.

speaking immigrant Jews, living in a concentrated area in downtown Montreal between the English to the west and the French to the east, constituted a “Third Solitude.”⁹²

The separate evolution and changing interrelationships among the identities involved in the growth of Montreal, including “uptown” Jews, “downtown” Jews, the French and the English, formed the setting into which Lavy Becker was born. The material below offers a first view of the ways in which Becker negotiated a path among these identities and in so doing answered a major question that his generation faced: what to retain and what to discard from the old-world heritage and beyond that, how to use one’s own gifts together with the communal heritage to be a contributing member of the new society.

III.1.2 A Downtown Jew

The Jews who came to Montreal, for the most part from Russia and Poland, came from a world that was changing dramatically on many levels. How and even whether to continue to live as Jews, whether to join forces with the workers of the world and lose an outdated particularity, or to safeguard Jewish life and identity by realizing the millennial dream of return to Zion – and a myriad variations on these themes – were questions that Eastern European Jews had experienced in the lands of their birth and then brought with them to Canada, along with the driving practical issue of how to live a decent life, make a living and care for and educate children. For the majority who were traditionally observant Jews, they also had to answer the question of how flexible they were willing to be with the rules of Jewish life in order to survive in a new place. All of these issues, the idealistic and ideological, the religious

⁹²*The Third Solitude: A.M. Klein's Jewish Montréal, 1910-1950. Journal of Canadian Studies* Vol. 19 No. 2, Summer 1984. Gwethlynn Graham, *Earth and High Heaven*, (New York: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1944), p. 11: “Montreal society is divided roughly into three categories labelled “French” “English” and “Jewish” and there is not much coming and going between them, particularly between the Jews and either of the other two groups; for although as a last resort, French and English can be united under the heading “Gentile,” such an alliance merely serves to isolate the Jews more than ever.”

For an elaboration of the theme from the perspective of Canadian literature see Michael Greenstein, *Solititudes: Tradition and Discontinuity in Jewish-Canadian Literature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989).

and the practical were worked through in the specific context of downtown Montreal in the first decades as the immigrants found their feet and structured their community. It is this Yiddish-speaking community, intensely diverse but united through language, a shared past and shared community institutions, that remained the primary referent for the idea of “community” for Lavy Becker and others of his generation. As the *Coda* presented in Chapter 7 illustrates, that sense of community remained strong throughout the lives of Becker and other community leaders.

* * *

Lavy Becker⁹³ was born in Montreal in 1905 of parents who had immigrated from Minsk via New York. His father Ben Zion Becker, “a lovely gentleman with a long black beard and wonderful deep voice”⁹⁴ made a living by performing a series of ritual functions for the community, as *shohet* (kosher butcher), *mohel* (ritual circumciser), and cantor.⁹⁵ Becker senior would not have had to compromise the injunction not to work on the Sabbath as others in the community did and his son Lavy claimed that up until he arrived at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, “No one could have been more orthodox in *halakhic* observance than I.”⁹⁶ Nonetheless, this was an open society in which the boundaries between “solitudes,” English-speaking-Protestant, French-speaking-Catholic and Yiddish-speaking-Jewish, were at least somewhat porous, as one of Lavy Becker’s favourite stories illustrates. Lavy Becker liked to tell this story as an illustration of what a great psychologist his father had been, making it

⁹³ Apparently the name “Becker” entered the family as “Bodker” in the generation of Lavy Becker’s parents. The original family name remains unknown. (Donnie Frank, interview by author, 10 February 2003)

⁹⁴ As remembered by congregant Saretta Levitan, interview by author 13 September 2000.

⁹⁵ For a study of the Eastern European Orthodox rabbinate in Montreal’s downtown immigrant community see Ira Robinson, *Rabbis and Their Community: Studies in the Immigrant Orthodox Rabbinate in Montreal, 1896-1930*. (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, forthcoming).

⁹⁶ Shul member Reuben Brasloff commented about working on the Sabbath, as follows: “... in those days, the Jewish working man had to work on the Sabbath. The clothing factories worked Saturdays until 1. My father did and so did I. You had to take a pragmatic approach.” Interview by author 16 June 2004.

possible for him to go to the movies with a gentile friend on the Sabbath.⁹⁷ It might also be seen as an early instance of what Mordecai Kaplan called “living in two civilizations:”

I remember during the period of time just before my bar mitzvah when we lived on Prince Arthur Street, a Christian neighbour asked me to go to a movie to see the ‘Perils of Pauline.’ For the five cents entrance fee we would also get an ice cream cone. But then that was Shabbat afternoon, and what do you do? Despite my father’s forbidding me to go, I must have been somewhat insistent, because he eventually arranged with my gentile boyfriend to give him the money in advance so that he could pay for me. We promised not to take the streetcar (of course, we didn’t have enough money for the fare), and so we walked down to the movie house on St. Lawrence boulevard. I have never forgotten the fact that my father, in his intensity of Jewish life, nevertheless was able to understand the need for and make compromises with North American life.⁹⁸

Throughout his life, Lavy Becker spoke fondly of his father. Another favourite story tells why and how Lavy came to be, in his words, a “shul person,” a characteristic that was central to his decision to found the Reconstructionist synagogue. The story goes that on Saturday mornings, instead of waking him up with a brusque “It’s time to go to synagogue,” Lavy’s father would knock gently on his door and say, in Yiddish, “Lavy, I’m going to shul ...”

The love of his father and of shul, and the warmth associated with both, remained with Lavy Becker to the end of his days. In a 1996 interview, twenty years after he had handed over spiritual leadership of the synagogue to Rabbi Ron Aigen, he offered a lovely metaphor for the way in which his Orthodox past, through his father’s prayer melodies, or *nusach*, continued to be alive in the Reconstructionist community he had created:

Nusach is very important to me. The *nusach* that [Rabbi] Ron [Aigen] is using is my father’s *nusach*. He has added many more melodies, drawn from more modern developments, so that the *nusach* has been enriched. When I make *kiddush* sometimes for the shul, on *yonteff*, that is basically my father’s *kiddush*. The way we *bentsch* after meals, is my father’s *bentsching*. My father’s neighbours still tell me that

⁹⁷ Judith Seidel’s statistics from 1938 (about 20 years after Lavy’s bar mitzvah) show that between 27 and 45% of the downtown Jews who answered her questionnaire went to the movies at least once a week. Aside from their entertainment value, movies offered a way in to the new culture. “The development and social adjustment of the Jewish community in Montreal.” (M.A. diss., McGill University, 1939) Table XLIIA.

⁹⁸ Lavy Becker liked to tell this story and did so on many occasions. This version was published in *Community and the Individual Jew* (Philadelphia: Reconstructionist Rabbinical College Press, 1986) p. 4.

they used to open their windows on the second and third floors so that they could hear our *zemirots* on Friday night, because of my father's musical capacity.⁹⁹

In Lavy Becker's day, Jewish children attended the English-speaking schools of the Protestant School Board. Jewish subjects were studied outside school hours. In addition to this extra-curricular study, Becker's parents made it possible for him at age 14 to go to New York, along with some of his friends, to study Talmud for two years at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary.¹⁰⁰

When I was 14, they responded to my whim to study at the *yeshiva* in New York, although, at home, it made necessary drastic economies, which, being young, I did not understand. It was just as well. Those two years among my peers, similarly motivated, carried me over the hump of teen-age rebellion and strengthened my natural acceptance of a full Jewish way of life and my love of the tradition.¹⁰¹

The factors responsible for Lavy Becker's affection for shul and his attraction to traditional Jewish study did not work the same way for Jack and Dave, his two older brothers (a fourth brother died in childhood), who were busy with the immediate responsibilities of making a living. In 1929 Jack and Dave, who had been button and trimming suppliers, bought the Rubenstein Brothers firm from the last surviving brother, Louis, and carried it forward skilfully and successfully.¹⁰² They used the Rubenstein foundry and machine shop to develop a sharpening attachment for a cutting machine that served Montreal's growing and

⁹⁹ Lavy Becker, interviewed by Barry Lazar, video recording, Montreal, Quebec. *Kiddush*. Blessing over wine and bread said on Sabbaths and holidays; *Zemirots* Songs traditionally sung after dinner; *Yonteff*, Jewish holidays; *Bentsch* To say grace said after meals.

¹⁰⁰ Jeffrey Gurock's study of Yeshiva University's predecessor, the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary [RIETS], offers this further context: "...Revel's school [RIETS] was coming into contact with—possibly under the aegis of the Agudat ha-Rabbanim's long-standing charity connections—the scions of Orthodox families from Baltimore to Denver, to Montreal, Toronto, and nine other cities in between." *The Men and Women of Yeshiva: Higher Education, Orthodoxy, and American Judaism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) p. 56.

¹⁰¹ "Legacy and Love" from "Beginnings, Memories, Bar Mitzvah". *The Reconstructionist Synagogue of Montreal*, p. 31.

¹⁰² Rubenstein Brothers brass foundry, a business catering to the horse and carriage trade, was started by two immigrant Jews from Poland in 1864 and taken over by their sons. The family became pillars of the Montreal Jewish community and were leaders in both Shaar Hashomayim and the Spanish and Portuguese synagogues. (Hillel Becker, interview by author March 3, 2005)

Louis Rubinstein was an extraordinary, multi-faceted man. Besides being a businessman, he was an athlete, an organizer of amateur figure skating throughout North America and a champion figure skater. He also served his community for 17 years as a Montreal alderman, only the second Jew to do so. Further, he left a lasting legacy to the community in the YMHA, an organization he was instrumental in developing during the 16 years he was its President (until his death). For an excellent biographical sketch, see *Inspiring Figure: The Louis Rubenstein Story*, a film by Iris Wagner, Memoirs Productions, 2004, distributed by the National Film Board of Canada.

industrializing clothing industry and gave the improved machine the delightfully Canadian name, “the Beaver.”¹⁰³

As the youngest sibling Lavy Becker was not confronted with the need to go to work as soon as possible, as his older brothers had been, and so he was able to take up the option of continuing his schooling. In addition to success in business, university studies were a favoured path into the new society for the immigrant Jews and they began attending McGill in increasing numbers starting in the early 1900s.

III.1.3 The “Jewish Problem” in Quebec and Canada; Lavy Becker at McGill

In the period between the two World Wars, the presence of the Yiddish-speaking downtown Jews made both the francophone Catholics and the anglophone Protestants uncomfortable, for different reasons. Although a lively debate continues as to the exact nature and extent of Quebec’s past anti-Semitism, there is no doubt that the phenomenon existed, on different levels.¹⁰⁴ The anti-Judaisms carried by the Church since early in the history of organized Christianity, including the characterization of the Jews as Christ-killers, remained a part of the Church’s teaching in Quebec, as is expressed in the opening lines of a poem entitled “Les Déicides” (c. 1898-99) by legendary Montreal poet Emile Nelligan (1879-1941):

Ils étaient là, les Juifs, les tueurs de prophètes,
Quand le sanglant Messie expirait sur la croix;
Ils étaient là, railleurs et bourreaux à la fois;
Et Sion à son crime entremêlait des fêtes.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ According to the Rubenstein Brothers website, “the first ever automatic sharpening system for straight knives.” See <http://www.rubenstein.ca/html/eng/history.html>

¹⁰⁴ I refer in particular here to the work of Esther Delisle, starting with *The Traitor and the Jew: Anti-Semitism and the Delirium of Extremist Right-Wing Nationalism in French Canada from 1929-1939* (Montreal-Toronto: Robert Davies Publishing, 1993). Delisle’s historical research documents a pervasive anti-Semitism through Quebec’s elites but her findings have been seriously challenged, among others by historian Gérard Bouchard and sociologist Gary Caldwell.

¹⁰⁵ “The God-Killers” // They were there, the Jews, the killers of prophets / When the bloody Messiah died on the cross; / They were there, mocking executioners, / And Zion mixed revelry in with its crime.

To this doctrinaire and theoretical kind of anti-Semitism was added the reality in Montreal of a mass migration of Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants, who formed the first non-Christian immigrant group to Québec and were seen by some as threatening to the fragile French/English balance in the province.¹⁰⁶ In addition, in the inter-war period, the first generation of Canadian-born Jews, Lavy Becker's generation, aspired to the same successes through small business and the professions as did the French Canadians, many of whom were also making the transition from rural life to the big city. Further, difficult economic times exacerbated tensions, leading to the *Achat Chez Nous* campaign that aimed to stop French Canadians from buying from Jews.¹⁰⁷ The ground was fertile for the seeding of anti-Semitic propaganda and these were the years when Quebecker Adrian Arcand led a local movement modeled on Italian fascism. One downtowner remembers stumbling upon a meeting at the Monument National, cradle of francophone nationalism and theatre and also a venue both for Yiddish theatre and for overflow services on the High Holidays: "There were big swastikas in the Monument National, they were Nazis. They wore black berets and carried canes. They were waving their canes yelling 'À bas les juifs, À bas les étrangers, Go back to Jerusalem. Maudits juifs.'"¹⁰⁸

The narratives of identity for francophone Catholics in Quebec between the wars involved Jews as the very thing good Christians were *not*, both according to millennial doctrinaire storylines and in line with new fascist propaganda, fuelled by contemporary practical considerations. For anglophones in Montreal and in the rest of Canada as well at this period, Jews were also the very opposite of what "we" were, though for different reasons. The Anglo-

¹⁰⁶ Pierre Anctil, *Le Rendez-Vous Manqué: Les Juifs de Montréal face au Québec de l'entre-deux-guerres*. (Québec: Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, 1988) 14-15.

¹⁰⁷ As Ira Robinson has pointed out, the evidence that this campaign was very successful or that it harmed the Jews remains to be brought forward. (Discussion in the context of Oral Comprehensive Exam, July 14, 2005).

¹⁰⁸ "Down with the Jews, Down with the foreigners, Go back to Jerusalem. Damned Jews." From the film *Montréal Jewish Memories Stories of the War Years, 1939-1945* by Stan Asher and Dov Okouneff (Canada, 2003).

Protestant/British/Canadian point of view on the subject was expressed in the alarm felt by those in charge of McGill University, as the numbers of Jewish students began to rise steeply.

The “Jewish problem” had been discussed at McGill starting in the early 1920s. Pierre Ancil points out that the Faculty of Arts was the gateway to a series of liberal professions and well-paying jobs that had until then belonged to anglophone Protestants; in medicine, as university professors or in commerce, administration and the applied sciences. Jews made up between 32 and 34% of the student body in the Faculty of Arts between 1924 and 1926, a stunning statistic considering that they constituted just over 2% of the population of Quebec during these years.¹⁰⁹ Ancil cites testimony concerning the views held by McGill principal Arthur Currie and Dean of Arts Ira Allen Mackay as expressed through correspondence between the two in 1926.

In a letter to Currie dated April 23, 1926, Mackay sets out his views on the Jewish Problem, in answer to Currie’s request that he do so. Among his views is the following statement which clearly places Jews as the excluded negative in the narrative of Canadian identity:

Indeed, our economic conditions being by nature what they are in Canada, the Jew is probably the least desirable immigrant who comes to this country. Canada needs scientific men of initiative and intuition, engineers, builders, agrarians and workers, while the population of the Jewish community is almost altogether engaged in the professions and in money lending and trading occupations. Obviously we do not need any more of this class in Canada. We already have enough professional men and far too many money lenders and middle men.¹¹⁰

Further on in the same letter, Mackay confesses:

All the students who enter the University ... now enter, as you know, by crossing the threshold at the Dean’s doorway, and I must confess I never see a new Jew crossing this threshold without muttering inaudibly, ‘There goes another clean, wholesome, upstanding Canadian boy across the frontier to practice his profession in the United States of America.’

¹⁰⁹ Rosebnberg, 1939, Table 27, p. 41 cited in Ancil p. 39.

¹¹⁰ McGill University Archives. RG2, Principal’s Office. File #445, “Jewish Students at McGill” Letter from Dean Ira A. Mackay to Sir Arthur Currie, Principal, McGill University. April 23, 1926.

The solution arrived at to the Jewish problem at McGill was to limit the number of Jewish students attending the university. As detailed by Anctil, limits were set starting in 1925 at different times and in different faculties based on geography, on setting higher academic levels for the admission of Jews and through outright quotas.¹¹¹

Prior to the Second World War the narratives of identity, on both the English and the French sides of the Dominion of Canada, were structured so as to specifically include Jews as negative factors, part of the “foreign” element inimical to what “we” were all about. Lavy Becker and his generation dedicated themselves to proving that such views of Jews were mistaken. Whether this goal was overt or not, especially in years before the Second World War, is difficult to say. McGill’s administrators kept their biases to themselves during the time Lavy Becker was an undergraduate (1922-1926) and the first, discreet, quotas were only put in place the year before he graduated. The “solitudes,” English, French and Jewish were all present on campus and must have mingled to some extent. English was the predominant culture but there was as well a French Canadian Club and the Maccabean Circle for Jews.

Lavy Becker earned a Bachelor of Arts degree with honours in Psychology and Philosophy. While at McGill he joined the Philosophical and the Psychological Societies as well as the

¹¹¹Anctil, *Rendez-Vous*, 68 ff.

The remarks of McGill’s Dean of Arts and Principal should be contextualized. The website of the research and outreach program “The Pluralism Project: World Religions in America” gives the following account of Horace Kallen’s founding of the Menorah Society at Harvard, which offers a striking parallel with the conditions Lavy Becker encountered at McGill during the same time period:

“By the beginning of the twentieth century, with the arrival of Russian Jewish students, a Menorah Society was formed at Harvard University. One of the founders was Horace Kallen, who became well known for his incisive writings on cultural pluralism. Yet a climate increasingly hostile toward immigration threatened Jewish advances in American universities. Culminating with the federal immigration quotas in the 1920s, anti-immigrant fervour spread to universities like Harvard, where many were concerned that “American boys” were losing out to Jewish immigrants in admissions. The Jewish percentage of the freshman class had risen from 7 percent in 1900 to 21.5 percent in 1920. In the early 1920s faculty and student debate raged over a proposal by President Abbott Lawrence Lowell to limit the number of Jews at Harvard. To its credit, the faculty soundly rejected the plan, but a new application form, more explicit about ethnicity, was introduced giving rise to suspicions of a de facto quota.”
http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~pluralism/98wrb/juda_itr.htm

Maccabean Circle and continued to study Talmud and Hebrew alongside his secular studies.¹¹²

During his first year at university, he was among the founders of the (Orthodox) Young Israel Synagogue and was its first President.¹¹³

Lavy Becker kept his Jewish identity strong during his years at McGill and at the same time, it would seem, participated in something of the effervescence of the times. This was the “Jazz Age,” an age of youth and freedom, of bobbed hair and flappers; these were the “Roaring Twenties,” that roared particularly loudly in Montreal, which became known as the Paris of North America during prohibition years (1920-1933). Becker’s graduating yearbook ‘favourite expression’ “*Well, philosophically speaking ...*” suggests a young man quite pleased with himself and inclined to reflect on things. Very intriguing is the motto that appears under his yearbook picture, the first part of which is a phrase that belonged to the jazz and blues lyrics repertoire and was Count Basie’s motto:¹¹⁴ “*Keep on keeping on—and you’ll get there.*” It is likely not possible to establish where he picked up this motto, but its vernacular ring bespeaks an openness that was very much a part of Lavy Becker’s character, as was the determination the message conveys.

¹¹² The 1926 Old McGill Yearbook gives the following description of the Maccabean Circle: “The Maccabean Circle was founded in the year 1905 by a handful of students who felt the need and desirability of furthering the study of Jewish problems and Jewish culture. The membership grew from year to year, until in 1920 the Circle became affiliated with the Intercollegiate Menorah Association, an international organization, whose aim is likewise ‘the Study and Advancement of Jewish Culture and Ideals.’” (Old McGill, 1926) In 1925 the Maccabean Circle Vice President was H. Batshaw, who was to become Quebec’s first high court judge. In that year, “The literary programs this session have so far consisted of a discussion of the School Question, a symposium on Israel Zangwill, a lecture on the ideals of Intercollegiate Menorah, and a student debate on ‘Assimilation.’ The meetings have been well attended by the members, with an average attendance of about 150.”

¹¹³ This group first met in 1922 and submitted its Letters Patent in 1924.

¹¹⁴ Count Basie’s motto was “We gotta keep on keeping on.”

Nancy Marelli’s *Stepping Out: The Golden Age of Montréal Night Clubs 1925-1955* (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 2004) contains valuable archival material and makes one wonder if Lavy Becker didn’t wander into some of the nightclubs she shows as adjacent to the Monument National, a venue he had known ever since he went there as a boy to see “The Perils of Pauline” there with his Gentile friend (see above on page 82).

Lavy Becker joined McGill's Gymnastics Club, where he competed for the university as part of its Intercollegiate team, the first Jew to do so.¹¹⁵ The 1926 Old McGill yearbook portraits of the officers of the Societies to which Becker belonged show Jews among the Philosophical and the Psychological Society executives and representatives.¹¹⁶ But the gymnastics club shows Becker, muscular and composed with the McGill "M" on his white singlet, a lone Jew seated beside Finlay, McKay, Muller, Buchanan, Coleman, Ross, Caron, Delahay, McKyes, Cumine and two Consiglios (see Figure 2). It was here that young Lavy experienced the anti-Semitism of team mates uncomfortable with the evidence of his Judaism:

At McGill my father did experience anti-Semitism, on the gym team. He traveled with them to various universities and changed with them in the locker rooms. He wore an "arba kanfos" [a fringed undershirt worn by Orthodox Jews] and they weren't comfortable with it. They asked him please not to wear it. Then in his 4th year the team was going to travel further, outside of Quebec. The coach took him aside and asked if he would mind giving up his place to a first-year student headed for medical school. This new student would be spending many years with the team and Lavy had already been with them for three years so could he step aside to make room ... Lavy accepted, but he realized afterwards that the coach's "logic" didn't hold and that they were uncomfortable having him as part of the team now that they would be venturing further afield to compete.¹¹⁷

Despite these experiences, a love of gymnastics remained part of Becker's character, expressing both a touch of bravado and the physical, practical dimension he retained all his life. His grown grandchildren relate how delighted they were as youngsters when their grandfather would stand on his head to entertain them, and they would scramble for the money that fell out of his pockets.¹¹⁸ As well, Reconstructionist movement architect Ira Eisenstein offers in his autobiography a glimpse of Becker in his early twenties, just as he had

¹¹⁵ Concerning Jews and sports during this period, Ahser and Okounoff's film *Montréal Jewish Memories: Stories of the War Years, 1939-1945* (Canada, 2003) offers the following: "There were plenty of sports in the 20s to the early 30s. They played at the Y. There were outstanding athletes there. Gymnastics and fancy diving. Was it acceptable in the Jewish community to be an athlete? There used to be contests in theatres like the Imperial or the Français. I would pick up two bucks for standing on my hands longer than anybody else."

¹¹⁶ Philosophical: Otto Klineberg as President and E.O. Freedman as Secretary sitting alongside Dean Ira Mackay, D.H. MacVicar, J.A. Taylor and Prof. Caldwell; The Psychological Society lists L. Hart and O. Klineberg as representatives.

¹¹⁷ Donnie Frank telephone interview by author February 27, 2005.

¹¹⁸ Iris Wagner, *The Lovingkindness of Lavy Becker* (Memoirs Productions, 2004).

entered rabbinical seminary, a short, muscled, “little chap with a funny moustache.” Eisenstein had been the camp rabbi at a kosher Boy Scout Camp in New York State. He had had no experience, had never been a boy scout and wanted to sit in his tent reading and disdaining as intellectually inferior the young people who were his charges. Naturally, this did not earn him much popularity and he might have packed up and gone home had he not been “saved” by Becker and the example he set:

I was ready to quit, go home, and try to forget the whole nightmare experience. A fortunate circumstance saved me. Across the lake there was another kosher camp. The rabbi was a little chap with a funny moustache and a well-developed, muscular body. Actually he was a gymnast from McGill University, a first-year student at the Seminary who had entered only the previous January. His name is Lavy Becker, and to him I owe whatever transformation I was able to effect that summer. I did not in so many words tell him my troubles, but I watched him at work. I observed his manner of relating to the counsellors of his camp, his warmth, his friendliness, his patience with the kids, his participation in their games, his willingness to serve as an examiner [...]. He told folksy stories. He laughed a good deal, his good humor was infectious.¹¹⁹

The path that Lavy Becker had recently embarked upon when Ira Eisenstein first met him – the decision to leave Montreal and pursue rabbinical studies – was an important life choice. Paradoxically, it was this move that also brought about a definitive break with the Orthodox practice of Judaism he had inherited from his father.

III.1.4 Lavy Becker’s Break with Orthodoxy and his Introduction to Reconstructionism

In May of 1926 Becker graduated from McGill and again journeyed to New York to study, this time for the rabbinate. His first choice would have been the Orthodox Seminary but this did not work out, as his daughter sees it, because her father wanted to equip himself with a degree in a structured manner rather than enter an open-ended course of study:

At Yeshiva [University] they told him, ‘You can’t really study here to be a rabbi. What you have to do is study and study and study some more; if and when we think you’re ready, then you’ll become a rabbi.’ My father was too impatient. The

¹¹⁹ Ira Eisenstein, *Reconstructing Judaism: An Autobiography*. (New York: The Reconstructionist Press, 1986) 55.

Jewish Theological Seminary accepted him for a four-year course, and this is why he went there rather than the Orthodox academy.¹²⁰

Lavy Becker wrote about his choice of the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary in more formal and complex terms in a 1984 article in the *Reconstructionist*, part of a five-part tribute to Mordecai Kaplan. It would seem that Becker's father was in the same position as Mordecai Kaplan's parents had been in a generation earlier, in not understanding that for some Conservative Jews, some aspects of the observance of Jewish law, the *halakhab*, were considered optional. As Jeffrey Gurock presents it, Kaplan's Orthodox immigrant parents and their peers hoped that the newly created Jewish Theological Seminary – whose President from 1901 to 1915 was Solomon Schechter, hence “Schechter's Seminarium” below – would give their children traditional Jewish training and at the same time equip them to speak to the young American Jews who were in danger of drifting away from the religion entirely, or gravitating to Reform, which was almost as bad in their opinion.¹²¹ They did not think that their offspring would be led astray, away from the path of Jewish law, and were not clear about the tenets of Conservative Judaism. Lavy Becker expresses similar sentiments in writing about the “confusion” of his father's generation:¹²²

My father's agreement that I should apply to Schechter's Seminarium in 1926 was as good an illustration as any of the confusion in Jewish life in America in that generation. No one could have been more orthodox in *halakhic* observance than I. Yet the Seminary was acceptable.¹²³

At the Jewish Theological Seminary, Becker was taught among others by Mordecai Kaplan and learned from him that it was possible to “tamper” with the traditional prayer service. Becker

¹²⁰ Donnie Frank, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, 10 February 2003. See J.S. Gurock, *The Men and Women of Yeshiva: Higher Education, Orthodoxy, and American Judaism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) and Gilbert Klaperman, *The Story of Yeshiva University*, (London: The Macmillan Company, 1969).

¹²¹ J.S. Gurock and J.J. Schacter, *A Modern Heretic and a Traditional Community: Mordecai M. Kaplan, Orthodoxy, and American Judaism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

¹²² Mel Scult's biography of Kaplan makes an analogous comment about Kaplan senior: “Although Kaplan's father mistrusted Ehrlich's orientation and abhorred his guest's advocacy of Biblical criticism, he apparently voiced no objections to the Seminary curriculum.” p. 47

¹²³ “The Influence of Mordecai M. Kaplan, Z”L: part five”. *The Reconstructionist* (July-August, 1984) 25-26.

could perhaps have turned away at this point but Kaplan's experimentation with "alternative forms" appealed to him:

If I was impressed with Kaplan on first contact, I was disturbed by his reported behaviour on the *Kol Nidrei* eve of a few weeks earlier, as reported by Professor Ginzberg when our class met for the first time. He castigated Kaplan for attempting to change the text and music of *Kol Nidrei*. In my Orthodox naiveté, I could not understand how anyone could dare to tamper with the *mahzor*. I was to learn in the years that followed, under the influence of Kaplan and Ira Eisenstein (whose entry into the Seminary a year later brought me my closest friendship of a lifetime), much about alternative forms.¹²⁴

Lavy Becker became Mordecai Kaplan's student and went on to be a leader in Reconstructionism, a builder of the movement alongside his friend, Mordecai Kaplan's son-in-law Ira Eisenstein:

As one of his [Kaplan's] students in the next four years and as a rabbi in New York over the first five years that followed my graduation, I did much learning and a considerable amount of unlearning. I was one of the in-group around Kaplan, Kohn, Eisenstein, in the earliest development of the movement. When *Judaism as a Civilization* was published in 1934, I was able to organize immediately two study groups to use the book as a text. They may have been the first in the country. Kaplan was thrilled, as he was when I did the same in Detroit and New Haven.¹²⁵

Eventually, having travelled and worked in the United States and in Europe after the war, Becker would return to Montreal and start the "Reconstructionist Synagogue of Montreal" based on the Reconstructionist philosophy. Here, as in his comments on the discussion groups he started, we sense Becker's delight in being the first to launch an avant-garde initiative. Although there had been small groups, *havurot* or fellowships, that had called themselves "Reconstructionist," Becker's was the first *synagogue* to adopt this label:

After I organized the Reconstructionist Synagogue of Montreal in 1960, I resumed more frequent contact with Kaplan. He was excited that, finally, there was a congregation that dared openly to name itself as Reconstructionist.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

Kol Nidrei, The evening service that begins the high holy day of Yom Kippur. *Mahzor*, Special prayer book for the High Holy Days and festivals.

¹²⁵ "The Influence of Mordecai M. Kaplan, z"l: part five". *The Reconstructionist*. (July-August 1984) 25.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

Although the two were very different, even radically different personalities, Lavy Becker being an outgoing, gregarious, physical person and practical thinker while Mordecai Kaplan was reserved, private, and a brilliantly intense major thinker, the two shared many aspects of background. Besides having roots in adjoining regions in Eastern Europe, both men had inherited a love of Jewish life and learning from their fathers, both of whom also showed some flexibility with the tradition that their sons took much further.¹²⁷ Given the affection Lavy Becker held for his own father, he could perhaps have given no greater tribute to his teacher than to say, in terms reflecting his early training in psychology, that Kaplan eventually became a “father replacement”:

Each time he visited, I felt I was enjoying the best of two worlds. He was still my great teacher, and he had also become a kind of father replacement.¹²⁸

After leaving the Jewish Theological Seminary, Lavy Becker went on to a short stretch as a professional rabbi at a pulpit in Long Island (1930 – 1935), the only period during which he was paid to be a rabbi and the first of the “four careers” into which he would later divide his life. After returning to Montreal in 1947, he would spend some time working in the family business (1947 to 1969), his third career.¹²⁹ The fourth was his long career as a volunteer, including the chairmanship of a multitude of Jewish organizations.¹³⁰ In between the first and third careers were 12 years (1935-47) during which Becker was employed as a professional

¹²⁷ Lavy Becker’s parents were from Minsk, Belarus. Kaplan was from a small town outside Vilna, Lithuania.

¹²⁸ “The Influence of Mordecai M. Kaplan, z”l: part five”. *The Reconstructionist*. (July-August 1984) 25.

In connection with Lavy Becker’s “two fathers,” visitors to the chronic care hospital that was Lavy Becker’s last home saw that two framed photographs had pride of place on his wall: one was of his father, the other of Mordecai Kaplan.

¹²⁹ The biography of Becker in Aigen and Hundert, ed. *Community and the Individual Jew* (Philadelphia: Reconstructionist Rabbinical College Press, 1986) states that he received a Master of Hebrew Letters from the Jewish Theological Seminary but I find no evidence of this in the JTS archives. On the contrary, the Faculty Minutes for 1926 and 1927 suggest that Becker did not graduate because he was lacking courses in Bible and Talmud. His daughter remembers her father telling her about this, that he intended to make up the courses but did not, in the end, since life and work became busy, involving and engaging. (Donnie Frank, telephone interview by author, February 27, 2005).

While studying at the JTS, Becker also took classes in education at Columbia, part-time, out of interest as did other Seminars. Collecting these courses together he was apparently able to earn a Masters of Physical Education from Columbia. See “Rabbi Becker Devoted Firebrand” by Alan Hustak, *Montreal Gazette*, October 5, 2001, page A4.

¹³⁰ See “Four careers later, rabbi is still living the volunteer life” *Montreal Gazette*, May 17, 1986, J6.

social worker. These years included his work with the Joint Distribution Committee in the American Zone in Germany, a series of experiences that remained the most profound of his career. Here Lavy Becker was able to use the practical and “people skills” that were his clearest gifts at a time when the need for these skills was intense.

III.2 “The Need is So Great”: Lavy Becker’s work with the Joint Distribution Committee

In *Delayed Impact: The Holocaust and the Canadian Jewish Community*, (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000) Franklin Bialystok writes about how difficult it was for the Canadian Jewish community to respond to the Holocaust survivors who came to Canada after the war and how hard it was for the survivors to speak of their reality, so different from anything “normal” people had experienced. It was really only in the 1980s, when Holocaust museums in Canada developed ways to “tell the story” that the silence, awkward on the one side and painful on the other, could be broken. Before that, survivors stayed together; those who went to synagogue prayed together, befriended each other, speaking or not.

Bialystok’s portrayal is compelling and convincing but it does not really describe the community at “Lavy’s Shul,” where there was a mix of people and the conversation flowed. For example, Theresienstadt survivor Erika Barber, wife of synagogue president Stephen Barber was a core member and she *did* talk about her experiences. For young rabbi Ron Aigen who arrived in 1976, Erika Barber’s stories would be the first, first-hand accounts he had heard of what had happened.¹³¹ Lavy Becker as leader also played a critical role in establishing an open environment for talk and discussion, described in Chapter 5 as a “culture of conversation.” Canadian by birth, he had not personally experienced what the survivors had

¹³¹ Ron Aigen, Interview by author, March 28, 2003.

gone through. On the other hand, Becker was engaged to help after the war and his work in this context had allowed him to see and understand more than most Canadians at that stage and also to be of service.

Lavy Becker's daughter Donnie Frank speaks of her father's time working for the Joint Distribution Committee in the American Zone of Germany as the most fulfilling of his life. He was able to be at the center of the action in the unfolding story of the Jewish people after the Holocaust, and to be there in such a manner as to help concretely, which was what he did best:

He went off to Europe where he was a wonderful administrator. I think that was probably the best year of my father's life. At one point he had to find a thousand eggs for a Passover Seder; where do you find a thousand eggs in Europe at the end of the war? He managed to do it. [...] On the border between Austria and Hungary, they hid him behind a bush. He watched 600 refugees come across the border at night. [...] He did a lot of weddings!¹³²

Further details are added by Hillel Becker, Donnie's older brother, born in 1930. He recounts how, after leaving the rabbinate to work professionally as a social worker in the Jewish communities of Boston, Detroit and New Haven, Lavy Becker returned to Montreal to take a job as the Executive Director of the YMHA there.¹³³ Hillel Becker's account graphically conveys some of the drama his father was involved with. In so doing, he also makes the point that he understood about the Holocaust early, thanks to his father, and so did not experience the silence Bialystok documents among other Canadians:

In 1944 we moved to Montreal, and Lavy took the job at the YMHA. That was not a great experience for Lavy. My father was not particularly happy in that job, so he had his antennae out. His antennae picked up the fact that with the war over, in 1945 the army went in, and this is what they found: all these Jews roaming around the country, not knowing what to do with themselves, looking for their families, trying to survive, trying to recover.

¹³² Donnie Frank, interview by author, 10 February 2003.

¹³³ See Eiran Harris audio interview with Lavy Becker from 1989, Canadian Jewish Congress Archives, for details of how Becker was "recruited" for the JDC job and his initial reluctance to accept just after returning to Montréal after 18 years away.

The JDC [Joint Distribution Committee] was building a staff complement to run a whole series of programs.¹³⁴ Lavy made himself available and they hired him, gave him a few weeks of training in Paris, and they sent him right into the field. The war was over in May, this was six months later. It took that long.

In my father's time there was a lot of movement. They had passed the stage of taking the people from the camps and trying to bring them back to health. Now Jews were wandering around, they were stateless, they didn't have any documentation. They had been dispersed all over. Some had gone to China, some to central Asia. They were in the Ural mountains, all over the place. People were looking for their lost parents, children, husbands, wives.

Also, something else that caused a lot of havoc in my father's time: there was a pogrom in Poland in 1945, in Kielce; this is *after* the war. Jews were coming back to their *shtetlach* and their home towns to see whether they could rebuild their lives. Now you have this tumult with more anti-Semitism and so Jews, having come back to their home towns, were on the move again. Where were they going to go now? They seemed to be attracted to Germany, it seemed to be a magnet. That's where the army was, the American army, that's where UNRRA was, that's where things were happening.¹³⁵ So there was a great population movement into Germany, which is where Lavy was stationed. And he got involved with the secret immigration to Israel, *Aliyah Bet*. It was a very exciting time. Through his letters I became an "understander" early, as a youngster; of course that tied in with Zionism too. Because the focus at that time was Palestine, and now the British were the bastards for preventing Jews from coming in ...¹³⁶

One of the letters that Lavy Becker wrote to his son Hillel is reproduced in full in *Community and the Individual Jew*, a volume of essays edited by Ron Aigen and Gershon Hundert on the occasion of Lavy Becker's 80th birthday. The letter ends with a charge to Hillel to dedicate himself to learning about Jewish life, that it is not enough just to have fun. In the urgency of this charge we may hear an echo of how Becker himself responded to what he was experiencing:¹³⁷

You and your pals at camp should dedicate yourselves with utter devotion – really learning this summer. It isn't enough just to enjoy yourselves Imagine, each of you, that you are a Polish Jewish boy or girl on the march ... Some, not much

¹³⁴The American Joint Distribution Committee was established in 1914 to help Jews in need.

¹³⁵ United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. Founded 1943 to assist regions liberated from Axis powers. Ceased functioning in 1949. *Shtetlach*, Plural of *shtetl*, the small towns or villages where Eastern European Jews lived before the Second World War.

¹³⁶ Hillel Becker, interview by author, 22 February 2004.

¹³⁷ Lavy Becker delivered speeches in 1946 and 1947 in the United States and Canada about the situation of surviving Jews in the U.S.-occupied zone of Germany at a time when the enormity of what was later called the Holocaust was becoming known. See "Rabbi Becker Devoted Firebrand" by Alan Hustak, *Montreal Gazette*, October 5, 2001, page A4.

older than you are among the able courageous leaders – at much too early an age to carry such heavy responsibility – but they do – the need is so great.¹³⁸

Further insight into Lavy Becker's response to what he had seen is available thanks to several pages of remarkable notes stored in the National Archives, that Becker possibly intended to revise for publication, two in a series of what he called "synagogue vignettes."

The numbered, handwritten foolscap sheets on which these "vignettes" are written convey graphically how moved Lavy Becker was by what he saw. In uneven handwriting he works and reworks his story, striving to bring together on paper the physical details and emotional resonances that made these unprecedented moments remain so vividly with him. Almost every sentence has been crossed out and reworked many times. In the pages cited below, page three carries the title, Synagogue Vignettes, underlined. In the left margin appears this list: Munich; Bergen Belsen; Alt Neue and/or Museum; Winnipeg; Regina. Drafts of the Munich and Bergen Belsen vignettes are worked out over the five pages and a version containing the main elements of each appears below.

Both vignettes remark in different ways on the diversity of Jewish backgrounds among those gathered for prayer, differences that in Montreal and in the United States were the occasion for rivalry or clannishness but that here were a source of pride and richness. The outstanding feature of the vignettes is the sense of affirmation of Jewish life and the resilience of the Jewish people that they convey, following so closely upon such horrors, and the power of desire and hope turned towards Palestine.

III.2.1 The Munich vignette:

When I first saw the once magnificent mansion along the banks of the Isar in Munich, the long salon had a granite Eagle and Swastika on the prominent wall. Then the eager hands of Jews liberated from Dachau only a few months earlier, chipped the hated emblem off the wall and replaced it with an Aron Kodesh and

¹³⁸ *Community and the Individual Jew* (Philadelphia: Reconstructionist Rabbinical College Press, 1986) 7.

tablets to transform this salon into a synagogue [sic] that resounded, that first Shabbat in early 1946, with the warm familiar prayers of Jews from Poland, Lithuania, Rumania and at least one from Montreal.

The transformation of a Nazi baron's home into a synagogue was one kind of symbol, the Shabbat service in the age-old tradition another symbol, the fervent prayers for return to Zion even via Aliyah Bet yet another.

For the liberated Jews who were now davening in their own shul – and what a shul – the first in Munich since Nov. 9, 1938, the infamous Kristal Nacht, the emotional depths reached were unfathomable. For this Western Jew it was an unforgettable experience.

III.2.2 The Bergen Belsen vignette:

For those who survived it and other camps – the Bad House, the one furnace left standing as a fearful symbol – and the mounds with their signs – “5000 buried here” – “3000 buried here” etc. – these were ever present to stand as witness to an unbelievably horrible experience. Resilient, pulsating, looking to their future in Israel, these survivors built on its very site a fully organized community – self-government, hospitals, schools, synagogues. Among the latter was one in which I prayed the first morning of *Shavuot* 1946. It was the synagogue of a *Kibbutz Dati*, organized in Poland, [members of which I had seen] moving together across borders in the black of night – through the Russian zone of Germany, to find temporary haven in Bergen Belsen while their next move was planned for them.

The synagogue structure was a Quonset hut – corrugated metal rounded from bottom of one wall to bottom of the other -- no windows but at each door – enter at one end, exit at far end – long benches and tables for congregants. It was close, and dismal. But no synagogue service anywhere was so decorous, so beautiful, so warm as this Bergen Belsen, Quonset Hut *Shavuot* service. For me, it was one of the richest of experiences.

They honoured me with Maftir and persuaded me to act as *Chazan* for *Musaf*. Born in Canada with a Litvack background, I recited that Haftorah and led in *Musaf* prayer Jews from Poland resident in Germany en route to Israel. These superficial differences were completely erased by the common tradition and the *Havara Sfardit* in which we davened -- I for the first time.

Their horrible experiences a matter of the past, their eyes looking and very souls lifted to Israel and a new life, they sang of *Matan Torah* as I've never heard before or since.¹³⁹

After his stint in Germany, Lavy Becker never again worked as a professional for the Jewish community preferring, perhaps, to serve more freely as a volunteer. Upon his return to Montreal he joined his two brothers in business and in 1947 began the “volunteer career,” in

¹³⁹ The vignettes are in the Lavy M. Becker Fonds, National Archives of Canada. MG 31H81, Vol. 6. File: Reports: Joint Distribution Committee, n.d., 1945-1946.

Shavuot, Jewish holiday, “Festival of Booths”; *Kibbutz Dati*, A kibbutz where traditional Jewish religious practice was observed (this was not the case on many of Israel's pioneering kibbutzim); *Chazan*, Cantor; *Musaf*, additional prayer service that follows the morning service on the Sabbath and Festivals; *Havara Sfardit*, Sephardic prayer melody; *Matan Torah*, Giving of the Torah, celebrated on the holiday of *Shavuot*.

which his major contributions to the Jewish and general communities in Canada and to the world Jewish community were made. The Canada to which Lavy Becker returned was very different from the one he had left when he went off to study at the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1926.

III.3 Post-War: Shattering Narratives, New Identities, Changing Times

After The Second World War, the collective narratives of identity that would form the context for Montreal's Reconstructionist Synagogue began to re-form in different ways. These profound shifts in religion, ethnicity and nationality, diverse and far-reaching, would affect who would join the Reconstructionist synagogue community, as well as the social and cultural context in which the community was born and evolved.

For Jews in Montreal and throughout North America, the Nazi program of genocide destroyed the world from which immigrants had come, though awareness of the full extent of the destruction and the shock of what had happened continued to penetrate only slowly for the next two decades. To the rupture represented by immigration in Lavy Becker's father's generation was added a searing second rupture and loss, creating a chasm across which memory faltered.

The most profound development for post-war Jewish identity was marked on May 14th, 1948, when the State of Israel was declared. Israel had become a central symbol of identification and a source of pride for Jews, especially for those who, like Mordecai Kaplan, had believed passionately for decades in the potential of and need for a Jewish homeland.¹⁴⁰ For displaced Jews in Europe, like the ones Lavy Becker had witnessed wandering stateless after the war, when countries like Canada continued to keep them out, Palestine and then Israel was a refuge.

¹⁴⁰The *New York Times*, November 23, 1959, p. 36 carries a report of Kaplan and Eisenstein urging the Reconstructionist organization to affiliate with the World Zionist Organization, after the Conservative United Synagogue Movement had made it clear that they were not going to join this "political" movement.

For the non-Jewish population of the land, the founding of modern Israel would become known as “the disaster” that contributed to the coalescing of a new collective identity for the people who would become known as the Palestinians.

The beginnings of the first Arab-Israeli war in November of 1947 prompted a small column in the *Globe and Mail* by the well-known and respected Canadian Anglican, the Rt. Rev. R.J. Renison. In his column entitled “Bethlehem Goodnight,” Renison writes about the month of November as “haunted by memories and dreams” (referring to the ‘lingering mystery of All Souls Day,’ followed by Memorial Day). He goes on to write about how the “beautiful word ‘Bethlehem’” – the birthplace of the “Saviour of the World” – is losing its “magical” resonance due to news reports of “bombing, murder, hatred and sudden death.” There is a sense of the end of an era in Renison’s conclusion, “No one knows what lies ahead, and so we say: “Bethlehem Good-Night, but not Good-Bye.”

In Catholic Quebec, 1948 saw publication of the *Refus Global* (“total refusal”), an extraordinary document the central text of which stands in stark in contrast to the tone and content of Bishop Renison’s wistful thoughts about the end of a chapter in the Christian mythic narrative. Printed by a small press in 400 copies and including essays, plays, drawings and photographs, the core of the *Refus* is a passionately-felt, oddly-written, intensely personal statement of identity written by the painter Paul-Emile Borduas. In fewer than 3,500 words, this statement combines: a response to world events and cultural trends, including the Holocaust,¹⁴¹ the Spanish Civil War;¹⁴² theories of the subconscious;¹⁴³ a historical narrative of the French

¹⁴¹ “How could anyone not scream, reading the news of that horrible collection of lamp shades made of tattooed skin stripped from wretched prisoners at the request of an elegant lady; or keep from moaning at the endless lists of concentration camp torments.” Note: this translation and the ones that follow are from the English version of the *Refus Global* (trans. Ray Ellenwood. Toronto: Exile Press, 1985) posted on the Marionopolis College website July 23, 2006 <http://www2.marianopolis.edu/quebechistory/docs/refus.htm>

¹⁴² “Who would not be chilled to the bone at the descriptions of Spanish jails, gratuitous reprisals, cold-blooded revenge?”

Canadian people;¹⁴⁴ and an excited plea for a new order based on the unforced impulses of the unconscious through art and the imagination.¹⁴⁵ Central to the whole of this text is a rebellion against the Catholic Church, its self-serving rule and iron grip on people's access to information and its reliance on fear to maintain its power and control. Borduas reaches back to the thirteenth century to locate the place where faith and intuition were replaced in the Church by reason and calculation, and forward to the concentration camps and Franco's jails to condemn Christian civilization, "To hell with Church blessings ... " Although the immediate response to the *Refus* was negative, its final paragraphs ring out with a desire for solidarity, freedom and independence that would find a growing audience among French Canadians in Quebec through succeeding decades:

Si nos activités se font pressantes, c'est que nous ressentons violemment l'urgent besoin de l'union. / Là, le succès éclate. / Hier, nous étions seuls et indécis. [...]

Au terme imaginable, nous entrevoyons l'homme libéré de ses chaînes inutiles, réaliser dans l'ordre imprévu, nécessaire de la spontanéité, dans l'anarchie resplendissante, la plénitude de ses dons individuels.

D'ici là, sans repos ni halte, en communauté de sentiment avec des assoiffés d'un mieux-être, sans crainte des longues échéances, dans l'encouragement ou la persécution, nous poursuivrons dans la joie notre sauvage besoin de libération.¹⁴⁶

On the English-speaking side, Canada began to pull itself together in the wake of the Second World War as a separate cultural entity, independent of Britain. Governor General Vincent Massey involved himself in trying to define "the Canadian type" based on his observation of

¹⁴³ The artists of the *Refus Global* were influenced by French poet André Breton's stream-of-consciousness (automatic) style, from which they derived their label, the "Automatists."

¹⁴⁴ "Small, humble, isolated, vanquished; trips abroad, the pull of Paris, sexual education, banished books; To hell with holy water and the French-Canadian toque!" (It should be noted in this context that Prohibition in America had opened glitzy nightclubs in Montreal, making it a "wide-open town" in the 30s and 40s, but only for some. The contrast between what was available in the city and the traditional Quebec Catholic rural lifestyle was stark.)

¹⁴⁵ "MAKE WAY FOR MAGIC! MAKE WAY FOR OBJECTIVE MYSTERY! MAKE WAY FOR LOVE! / Our passions must necessarily, spontaneously, unpredictably forge the future."

¹⁴⁶ "If there is urgency to our activities, this is because we feel, violently, the urgent need for unity. Therein lies success. Yesterday we were alone and undecided.

Within the foreseeable future, men will cast off their useless chains. They will realize their full, individual potential according to the unpredictable, necessary order of spontaneity - in splendid anarchy.

Meanwhile we must work without respite, hand in hand with those who long for a better life; together we must persevere, regardless of praise or persecution, toward the joyful fulfillment of our fierce need for freedom."

young soldiers in Great Britain.¹⁴⁷ In his book, *On Being Canadian*, he writes of the young men who “would have puzzled an observer a generation or two ago,” men who combined good manners with a relaxed openness and sense of purpose and who, through their being and bearing, defined a new identity:

They resembled in many ways both Englishmen and Americans, but they could not have been mistaken for either. They were Canadians, and with a very small margin of error one could spot them in the streets as such long before their badges could be identified. They could not have come from anywhere but Canada. Something in their bearing told the story—a combination of qualities—on the one hand a naturalness and freedom of movement, a touch of breeziness and an alertness which suggested the new world. They also showed self-control, an air of discipline and good manners, and they had generally taken some trouble about their appearance. They were rarely found lounging; they seemed always to have some purpose in mind.

Was this the Canadian type about which we had argued for so long? [...] In Great Britain, with hundreds of thousands of our fellow-countrymen alongside even greater numbers of Americans and men from the British Isles, we could put the matter to the test for the first time in our history, and the answer undoubtedly was, “Yes, there is such a thing as a Canadian.”¹⁴⁸

In succeeding decades the new Canada and the new “Canadian type” would owe much to its immigrants, including the Jews whom the old British establishment had regarded as “probably the least desirable” people to be admitted to the country. Lavy Becker was among those who deliberately set out to make this change and he was able to, thanks to his strong identification as a Jew and to the skills he had developed. As well, times were changing. John George Diefenbaker, Canada’s first Prime Minister to be neither English nor French was elected with a minority government in 1957 and then re-elected the following year with the greatest majority in Canadian history. On June 30, 1960, just weeks after Lavy Becker had convened the founding meeting of his Reconstructionist group in Montreal, Diefenbaker addressed his audience, “My fellow Canadians ...,” through the developing new medium of television to announce the introduction of the first Canadian Bill of Rights:

¹⁴⁷ One of the British types for whom anti-Semitism seemed to be part of their identity, Massey had been involved with the campaign to keep Jews out of Canada before and during the war. See Irving Abella and Harold Troper, *None is Too Many* (New York, Harper, 1982) p. 48.

¹⁴⁸ Vincent Massey, *On Being Canadian*. (Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons Canada Limited, 1948) 3-4.

It will declare the principle that every individual, whatever his colour, race or religion, shall be free from discrimination and will have guaranteed equality under the law. [...]It will assert the right of the individual and the right of a minority to be protected in the exercise of its rights against the majority. [...]It will give to Canadians the realization that wherever a Canadian may live, whatever his race, his religion or his colour, the Parliament of Canada will be jealous of his rights and will not infringe upon those rights.¹⁴⁹

III.4 Lavy Becker Returns to Settle in Canada and Found a Synagogue

III.4.1 1959-1960: Bicentenary of the Jews in Canada

For Lavy Becker, returning to Canada from Germany in 1947 meant a change in direction as he began to devote himself to his “volunteer career.” In addition to his work for the Reconstructionist Federation and Rabbinical College, the “partial list” in *Community and the Individual Jew* names 22 major organizations for which he was on the Board or Executive Committee including Allied Jewish Community Services (Life Member, Board of Trustees), the Vanier Institute of the Family, the Council of Jewish Federations, the Canada-Israel Chamber of Commerce, the Canadian Welfare Council, the Foundation for Jewish Culture, the Jewish Teachers’ Seminary of Montreal, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, the Canadian International Human Rights Year, the Canadian Jewish Congress and the World Jewish Congress.¹⁵⁰ The awards mentioned in the same source include Canada’s Centennial Medal, the *Keter Shem Tov* from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, an autographed photograph with Queen Elizabeth II and the Bronfman Medal from the Canadian Jewish Congress.

When he came back to live in Canada after his work with the Joint Distribution Commission, Lavy Becker appeared determined to live fully and publicly in “two civilizations,” as a Jew and as a Canadian. A golden opportunity to do both at the same time presented itself when he was named on March 17th, 1957, as convener of a Special Committee of the Canadian Jewish

¹⁴⁹See the website of Library and Archives Canada. July 23, 2006. <http://www.collectionscanada.ca/primeministers/h4-4052-e.html>

¹⁵⁰ *Community and the Individual Jew*, 194-5.

Congress on the Bicentenary celebrations of the Jewish Community of Canada, to take place in 1959.

Lavy Becker threw himself into the job with enthusiasm. Just a few weeks after his nomination, he had already met with M.H. Myerson, Saul Hayes, Louis Rosenberg and Samuel Levine and drawn up a highly ambitious program for the Bicentenary celebrations, as outlined in a memo to the CJC National Executive. Plans included the publication of “a major work such as a Social History of the Jewish Community of Canada,” a special production in Yiddish, the creation of a musical work, “possibly a cantata,” children’s celebrations in collaboration with Jewish schools, local celebrations in Jewish communities across Canada, the recognition of particular individuals, families and business establishments, an exhibition and an extensive collection program for the National Archives of the Canadian Jewish Congress.¹⁵¹

Although he might not have put it like this, Lavy Becker wanted to use the occasion of the Bicentenary to weave a Jewish strand into the Canadian narrative and the time had now come when this was possible. His intention is clear in point e) of his April 24, 1957, memo to the National Executive, where he focuses on the “intercultural” and public relations potential of the event, that is, the need to show Canada the importance of its Jews as well as to show Jews that they have a proud place in the Canadian nation:

As the 200th anniversary of the Jewish community in Canada also marks an important milestone in the history of Canada as a whole, it is suggested that the celebrations be planned not only for the Jewish community but also tie-up the various programmes with the total population of Canada and its history. In this connection the public relations aspect of the celebrations and intercultural relationships will have to be given special consideration.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Lavy Becker’s suggestion of a cantata may have been inspired by his friend Ira Eisenstein, who wrote five cantatas together with his wife Judith Kaplan Eisenstein, pioneering musicologist, daughter of Mordecai Kaplan.

¹⁵² Memo from Lavy Becker to the National Executive of the Canadian Jewish Congress, April 24, 1957, CA/64/602.

With respect to the “Canadian nation,” the marking of the bicentenary in 1959 illustrates the extent to which English and French continued to live as “Two Solitudes,” with the Jews as a third, on different sides of their inter-twined and to some extent mutually opposed narratives. Nowhere in the bicentenary documentation thus far reviewed was there mention of the totally other resonance the year 1959 would have had for most French Canadians, standing powerfully and symbolically in their minds and hearts as the anniversary of one of the key dates of “la Conquête,” the conquest of the French by the English, a moment of ignominy and defeat.¹⁵³ This apparent obliviousness to the sensibilities of French Canada occurred despite the fact that Lavy Becker demonstrated a clear desire to include the French Canadian reality during the dedication day ceremony for the synagogue he would found the following year (see below on page 257).¹⁵⁴

The celebrations of 1959 were a success and they enhanced Lavy Becker’s profile as a skilful organizer and man of action, including his willingness to take a tough stance where necessary in order to achieve his goals. The archives record Becker’s dissatisfaction with the state of “our indecision in regard to the whole bi-centenary” in a letter to Saul Hayes dated March 19, 1958. A letter dated May 28th, 1958, to Monroe Abbey, Chairman of the National Executive Committee of Congress and subsequently forwarded to the other members of the National Executive, pushes Becker’s discontent one step further, as he in effect threatens to resign:

Dear Monroe:

Pained though I am to have to do this, I am writing formally to suggest that the Chairman and the Bicentenary Committee should be relieved of their duties with

¹⁵³ The change from the French to the British regime meant a change in policy towards Jews, who had not been allowed to settle in the Catholic colony but were admitted under the new dispensation.

¹⁵⁴ The Canadian Jewish Congress Archives (CA/64/602) also include evidence that Becker wanted Jews in France to know about the bicentenary. A letter from Guy de Rothschild to Samuel Bronfman dated June 1st, 1959, suggests publication of a special number of the monthly magazine *ARCHE* devoted to the Canadian Jewish bicentenary. Further, the December, 1959 number of *La Vie Juive* published by the French section of the World Jewish Congress featured two articles to mark the occasion. The first, by Gerhard Riegner was entitled *Le judaïsme canadien à deux cents ans* and the second, by CJC research assistant at the time Ruth Wisse, was the story of Esther Brandau based on Sachs’ history of the Jews in Canada and entitled *La première femme juive au Canada*.

regard to the planning for the celebration of the Bicentenary in 1959. I am moved to do so because, with very few exceptions, our National Executive Committee does not seem sufficiently interested in the very idea of celebrating the 200th anniversary of the coming of Jews to Canada. In my opinion, this could have been the finest opportunity presented to us by circumstances to do a public relations job in the Canadian Jewish community, as well as with our Government and our many friends among the Christians in Canada. If, however, we, ourselves, are not enthusiastic about that possibility, certainly we shall not be able to convey any enthusiasm to others.¹⁵⁵

The letter had what no doubt was the desired effect and the Executive minutes of July 7, 1959 note that “It was unanimously felt that Mr. Becker should continue as Chairman of the Bicentenary Committee.” It is further noted that “The establishment of a fund was favourably considered,” and Becker was able to continue with his program of promoting awareness of the Jews in Canada with “our Government and our many friends among the Christians in Canada.”

* * *

With the significant achievement of the Bicentenary program behind him, at age 55 Lavy Becker set out to create a forum where he could express his lifelong affection for synagogue life, where he could continue to be a “shul person” in a way that was also fully resonant with his own understanding of and feeling for Jewish life. Lavy Becker created a community to which he brought a depth and richness of commitment to Jewish tradition and continuity, a seriousness of intent instilled from home and deepened by his life path. His freedom to experiment and the confidence with which he could lead were enhanced by the fact that he was never paid for any of the services he rendered the community as its founding “Honorary Rabbi” and leader.

¹⁵⁵ Canadian Jewish Congress Archives CA/64/602.

In doing these things, Becker also managed to continue his program of making it comfortable for Jews to live well and fully in “two civilizations,” the Jewish and the Canadian, by building the first synagogue in what had been the Anglo-Protestant bastion of Hampstead.

I.1 Founding the Shul

The downtown immigrant community that Lavy Becker was born into had been transformed by the time Congress marked the bicentenary of Canada’s Jews. The prosperity that followed the First World War had supported a movement out of the old immigrant district and a number of downtown Jews had begun moving to the suburbs, some to Notre Dame de Grace where Shaare Zion, Montreal’s first Conservative synagogue began as a *minyán* in 1920 and was incorporated in 1926.¹⁵⁶ By 1951, the Jewish population downtown had decreased substantially, replaced by immigrants of Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Polish and other ethnic origins.¹⁵⁷ With the June 22, 1960, election of Jean Lesage as premier of Quebec, the “Duplessis era” came to an end and the province engaged in a program designed to restructure the bases of Quebec’s economic and social life.¹⁵⁸ This program would usher in a new era in Quebec’s sense of itself, animated by a new pride in collective ownership expressed in the rallying call of Lesage, when he announced new elections two years later: *C’est maintenant ou jamais qu’il fait agir et c’est ainsi que nous serons maîtres chez nous!*¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ From their website: March 24, 1926, “While Shaare Zion Congregation became a legally incorporated body March 24, 1926, when it received its charter from the Province of Quebec, the foundation was laid back in 1920 when *minyán* met for Sabbath and Holiday services at the home of the late Jacob Finestone. Business meetings were conducted at the home of the late David Cummings. It was in September 1920 that the name, Shaare Zion, was adopted and a slate of officers elected.” August 2, 2006, <http://shaarezion.org/history.htm>

¹⁵⁷ Rosenberg *Changes* p. 3.

¹⁵⁸ Prime minister and attorney general of Québec from 1936-39 and 1944-59, Maurice Duplessis led his Conservative Union Nationale party in a paternalistic style that came to symbolize an old order, against which the new Quebec of the Quiet Revolution would in part define itself.

¹⁵⁹ From the speech given October 22, 1962, in which Lesage announced he would call an election to seek the support of the population for a thoroughgoing program of reform and renewal. “*It is now or never that we must act, and this is how we will become masters in our own house.*” Not only in Quebec were big changes underway. On July 13, 1960 the Democratic Party nominated John F. Kennedy as its candidate for president. Kennedy won the general

* * *

When Lavy Becker returned to Canada from Germany, he joined Shaar Hashomayim, in 1945 one of only two Conservative synagogues in the city.¹⁶⁰ Neither of the two Conservative synagogues practiced mixed seating, however, something he had become used to in the United States. On the other hand, Lavy Becker was not comfortable in the only synagogue in town that did have mixed seating, Montreal's one Reform synagogue, the Temple Emanuel. Donnie Frank remembers:

I know that when we lived on Lacombe Avenue we used to go to the Shaar [Hashomayim], my father and I. We used to walk and it was a far, far walk, from Snowdon. I was a little girl. It was quite traumatic in some ways, because I couldn't sit with my father. Until I was 6 or 7 I did but then one day some man came to my father and said to him, 'Your daughter's too old to be sitting with the men now.' So they made me go and sit with the women. My father was very angry. My father did not get angry very often. I could count on my fingers the number of times he got mad. But we couldn't do anything about it, that was the rule. [...] I can give you another example from the other side. It was when we went to the Temple for my cousin's bar mitzvah. It was a Friday night bar mitzvah. We all walked in, and they asked my father to take off his *kippah*. And he *was furious*. That was one of the other times I saw him angry. He gave the man a tongue-lashing, and he backed off. That's what the Reform movement was like in those days.¹⁶¹

The eighteen years that Becker had spent in the United States introduced him to Mordecai Kaplan and the notion that it was possible and indeed important to contribute to the evolution of Jewish life by experimenting with traditional practice. His years in the United States also accustomed him to the more liberal customs, mixed seating for example, that prevailed in the congregations he was associated with there and furthermore left him with a set of American contacts and friends.

election on November 8, 1960, becoming at age 43 the youngest president elected in the history of the United States.

¹⁶⁰ The second was the Shaare Zion (see note 156 above). The third, the Congregation of Western N.D.G., which was to become the Shaare Zedek dates its inception to 1951. In 1953, Lavy Becker helped to found the Beth El synagogue in the Town of Mount Royal. It was the first in Montreal to officially offer mixed seating.

¹⁶¹ Donnie Frank, interview by author, 10 February 2003.

In 1953, some friends of Lavy Becker's asked his help in starting a synagogue in the Town of Mount Royal, a "model city" suburb that had until recently kept Jews out by restricting residence.¹⁶² The friends wanted a synagogue and Becker volunteered to help them with what became Beth El, the first Conservative synagogue in Montreal to have official mixed seating. Becker's Beth El friends knew he was a Reconstructionist and asked if they might adopt this form but he discouraged them, in terms that demonstrate his sense of balance and realism, since theirs was to be a neighbourhood synagogue. As he recalled telling his friends, in an interview with Barry Lazar in 1996:

You are building this synagogue because you all live close to each other in a neighbourhood. You are a neighbourhood shul. You have to have broader scope than Reform, or even Reconstructionist. You ought to be some place in the middle, so that some of your more Orthodox can find it acceptable, some of your Reform too ...¹⁶³

The suburban synagogues that were being built after The Second World War were big showpieces and Lavy Becker didn't like them. A description of the situation at the time was given by Montreal Yiddish-language journalist and social historian Israel Medres:

In the newly transformed suburban community, synagogues are being erected on almost the same basis as large commercial enterprises. ... The expenditures, however, cannot be met by the congregants themselves or generated by religious functions. Revenue must be raised mainly by renting out halls for weddings, bar mitzvah parties, and so on. [...] Instead of concerning themselves with the true purposes of the synagogue—prayer, study, education of children—they must expend most of their energy and effort on the commercial aspects in order to be certain of an income.¹⁶⁴

An article in a special supplement of the English paper, the *Jewish Chronicle* devoted to the bicentenary of Canada's Jews, reinforces this view. In it, Arthur Saul Super writes about "A Prosperous but Troubled Community" possibly quoting Lavy Becker as "one Canadian Jewish

¹⁶² The 1921 census recorded 1 Jew; 4 in 1931; 12 in 1941; 298 in 1951 and 2,617 in 1961: Rosenberg *Changes*, p. 5.

¹⁶³ Beitel/Lazar video interview with Lavy Becker, 1996.

¹⁶⁴ *Between the Wars: Canadian Jews in Transition*. (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 2003) 151.

official”: "Synagogue life in all the large centres" writes Super "shows plain evidence of what one Canadian Jewish official has called the 'edifice complex.'"¹⁶⁵

He certainly did not want to construct an "edifice," but Lavy Becker was a "shul person" from way back and Montreal did not provide the kind of synagogue he wanted to go to. A friend at Shaar Hashomayim had suggested he work quietly for the changes he was interested in and asked him, "Why do you have to go all around the city telling everyone you're a Reconstructionist. If you didn't tell them that, I could get you on the Board of the Shaar and we could bore from within!"¹⁶⁶

This was not Lavy Becker's style. He wanted to be out front with his convictions and so he had to create the place he wanted to be part of, a place where the warmth and sense of community that remained with him from childhood could find a home. In the late spring of 1960, he placed an ad in the Montreal Star cordially inviting anyone interested to attend an open meeting "for the formation of a Jewish Reconstructionist Group" on Monday, June 13th, at 8:30 p.m. in Salon A of the Sheraton-Mt. Royal Hotel.¹⁶⁷ Of the 30-odd people who answered the call, most agreed to work towards the holding of Reconstructionist High Holy Day services that same year.¹⁶⁸ Services were held, successfully, and just a few weeks later, on October 20, 1960, the synagogue was incorporated under the Quebec Corporations Act. Private Bill 124, an "Act to Incorporate" lists the ten men who,

¹⁶⁵ *Jewish Chronicle*, October 30, 1959, p. iia.

¹⁶⁶ Beitel/Lazar video interview with Lavy Becker, 1996.

¹⁶⁷ You are cordially invited to attend an / OPEN MEETING / For the formation of a / Jewish Reconstructionist Group

On / Monday, June 13th, at 8:30 p.m. / Salon A / Sheraton-Mt. Royal Hotel /The meeting will be under the chairmanship / Of Lavy M. Becker

¹⁶⁸ Manfred Saalheimer, Perry Meyer and perhaps other early members as well were people Becker worked with at the Canadian Jewish Congress.

Have by their petition represented: That they profess the Jewish religion and, for the purposes of worship according to that religion, they desire to be incorporated as an ecclesial corporation.¹⁶⁹

The ten were: David Krashinsky, P. Eng; Manfred Saalheimer, executive; Lavy M. Becker, executive; Henry Dainow, chartered acct; Hillel Becker, sales exec.; Morris Bloomfield, exec.; David Saibel, MD; Arthur Rotman, social worker; Saul Venitsky; Milton Winston, notary.

Almost two and a half years later, on March 27, 1962, the minutes state that "we have now obtained official status from the province of Quebec as a synagogue with the power of registry, and we are therefore, now a legally constituted synagogue with all the necessary powers." The first annual meeting was then called for Thursday, April 12, 1962 at YMHA, in the boardroom at 8:30 p.m.

The next major landmark in the life of the small Reconstructionist community was the decision to establish a permanent home. As much as Lavy Becker loved the discussion and engagement characteristic of *havurah*, his intention was to create an environment where he could feel at ease and, given his background, that meant a synagogue building of some kind (for a full description of the structure that was erected and what it meant to the community, see Chapter 5, "Beautiful, Yet Simple: The Building" on page 178). The fact that the organized Jewish community was less than welcoming to the Reconstructionist experiment may have been a stimulus (see the section "We Were *Treij*" in Chapter 5). Becker may also have been motivated to get his synagogue home completed in time to dedicate it during the Canadian Centennial year. Not all members of the original community wanted to build; some would have preferred to stay small, flexible and informal. However, Lavy Becker was persuasive. The decision having been taken, Becker further persuaded the group that the siting of the synagogue should make a statement.

¹⁶⁹ Reconstructionist Synagogue archives.

III.4.2 Teaching a Lesson to Hampstead

Lavy Becker's wish to site his synagogue in Hampstead was deliberate, an expression of his determination not to allow Jews to be discriminated against in the post-war world. Although neighbouring "Model City", had advertised itself as "beautiful, restricted Town of Mount Royal," Hampstead had been somewhat more discreet.¹⁷⁰ Nonetheless, it was known that certain streets were closed to Jews, and Jewish children in Hampstead were not allowed into the public school.¹⁷¹

The reason we're in Hampstead is that I had become convinced, and so had a number of others, that Hampstead needed to have a lesson taught to it. They had kept Jews out of school, and they didn't seem to be too welcoming.¹⁷² There was no synagogue. I said, and I convinced others, I'm happy to say, that there ought to be a synagogue in Hampstead.¹⁷³

III.4.3 Statement of Intention from 1967

The statement of purpose that Lavy Becker created on the occasion of dedicating the synagogue's first permanent home is clear and succinct. It resonates with the cadences of Becker's voice and thought; it also reflects Kaplan's Reconstructionist philosophy and the thinking of the movement at the time. The full statement, reproduced in sections below, offers a good sense of the nature of the community, the specific kind of synagogue/*havurah* hybrid that Lavy Becker brought into being, and also something of the relationship of his synagogue to the rest of Jewish Montreal. The opening paragraphs emphasize the modesty that was important to Lavy Becker and his group, and include the nickname that members referred to themselves by, the "do-it-yourself" synagogue. They also show that Becker wanted to clarify his group's sense of purpose, both for the sake of the group, and because he was thinking of

¹⁷⁰ Betty Sigler, "The Bonds of Community," *Commentary* 9-4 (1950) p. 351.

¹⁷¹ See Canadian Jewish Congress National Archives file of correspondence about the Hampstead schools issue (ZD Hampstead), as well as Danny Fry, "A History of Hampstead 1914-1957" (May 12, 1980, unpublished paper, copy available from City of Hampstead Archives) for statistics on Hampstead's Jewish population and the dramatic shift that happened starting in the 1950s. I do not have confirmation of what Saretta Levitan and others have said "Oh Sharon, of course *everybody knew* that Jews could not live on certain streets."

¹⁷² Hampstead had obtained the right to establish a Protestant school, since there were none in the area; the schools in neighbouring Cote St. Luc were Catholic. This entitled the Hampstead school to restrict entry to non-Protestants. However, this restriction came to be seen as an expression of prejudice and bias – which it was.

¹⁷³ Beitel/Lazar interview, 1996. See also "Beginnings, Memories, Bar Mitzvah" p. 10

how this group would be identified by the broader community. It seems reasonable to assume that when Becker wrote about resisting the temptation to offer a negative definition by listing the things his community was *not* aspiring to, that he was thinking of the kind of synagogue with “edifice complex” that symbolized post-war suburban materialism:

At this juncture of our congregational existence, when we prepare to dedicate a modest home of our own and become more clearly identified in the eyes of the community, we would want to clarify in our own minds what we propose to stand for.

A statement of purpose or – maybe more simply – of expectations we hold in common, should possibly be preceded by a few home truths as to what we clearly do not want to become (either by design or by default). I am resisting the temptation to enunciate them, hoping that the draft statement which follows, partially in itself and partially by implication, will make its point.

I could not resist starting it with one, negatively re-assuring, clause in the sensitive area of ideology, so as to allay apprehensions on the part of some to whom we will be called upon to interpret the purposes and usages of our Reconstructionist Synagogue. This, as you will see, is immediately followed by the formulation of a very positive common expectation, characterizing us as the “do-it-yourself” group which we are, and hope to remain in a more developed form.¹⁷⁴

With respect to Reconstructionism, Lavy Becker is unambiguous. His goal is not that members commit themselves to a full reading of Kaplan and the other Reconstructionist thinkers of the day. However, there is an expectation both that people will familiarize themselves with Reconstructionism’s basic tenets and that they will deepen and broaden their knowledge of other practices within Judaism, as part of a commitment to “religious pluralism.” In line with the kinds of Reconstructionist *havurot* advocated in the pages of the Reconstructionist magazine at the time, Becker identifies his community as primarily adult-centered and learning-centered, and expects members to act as models of the “vital relevancy” of Judaism to the generations then active. It is also clear that the Reconstructionist Synagogue was conceived of as an experiment, suitable for those intrigued by it, and not a neighbourhood facility meant to be acceptable as a norm in the surrounding geographical area, where social and cultural affinities might have been the common denominator:

¹⁷⁴ This “Statement of Intention” is taken from an undated typed manuscript in the Reconstructionist Synagogue archives.

We do NOT expect of our members an a priori commitment to the ideology of Reconstructionism as developed in the writings of Mordecai Kaplan and the other leaders of the movement. . . .we do expect, however, of our members a willingness to exert the effort required for a study of the movement's basic philosophy.

We DO expect a commitment of our members to strengthen each other in a common search for purpose and meaning to Jewish existence. We would hope that our members would accept the principle of religious pluralism within Judaism, and that they would become so well informed that nothing Jewish will be alien to them, thereby enhancing the possibility for interaction and cross-fertilization of Jewish movements.¹⁷⁵

We have chosen to address ourselves mainly to adult members within the physical capacity of our building, which we conceive of not as a neighbourhood facility but as an unpretentious but frankly experimental operation by a number of people who are willing to try to demonstrate, as a group and in the conduct of their personal lives, the vital relevancy of Judaism for our time and environment.

Lavy Becker's goals for his community echo the movement's thinking on Jewish community and also express his own experience and values. Intellectual understanding and familiarity with Jewish practice are important objectives but these alone would not create the kind of shul experience Lavy Becker, or Kaplan wanted or advocated. The additional dimension of a personal, emotional experience of Jewish practice, such for example as Lavy remembered from his youth, was considered essential for members. Again in line both with movement philosophy and with Becker's own character and experience, socially engaged actions were part of the frame of reference, as was a highly participatory ethic. An awareness of existing Jewish community resources in the area of education, and the desire not to duplicate, led to the decision not to start up a religious school but to encourage members to use community resources:

Not solely aiming at gaining understanding, we hope, as a congregational family, to satisfy emotional needs in experiencing some of the glory of the Sabbath and of the annual cycle of the Jewish year.

Our group worship will have large elements of an instructional character, geared towards a program of study as a basis for acquiring a philosophy of life, grounded in Jewish values, and with a view to encouraging the involvement of members in relevant civic activities and social service.

¹⁷⁵ Ahad Ha'Am, one of Mordecai Kaplan's formative influences, once claimed that nothing Jewish was alien to him. The philosopher Franz Rosenzweig also uses the phrase in his essay "The Builders."

We do NOT envisage congregants as a captive audience, but will encourage their speaking up on matters of their serious concern pertaining to the welfare of the Jewish and general community, both on the occasion of worship-study meetings and at special gatherings.

We hope to invite for our discussions persons who by reason of their attainments can be expected to help us towards the advancement of one of our objectives. We hope to avoid duplication of effort and will encourage members to avail themselves of existing educational facilities.

Our weekly Sabbath gatherings will frequently single out for study a contemporary problem, and we shall also expect members to report on their experience in civic and social work.

Finally, Lavy Becker makes it clear that one of his goals is outreach, specifically to the kind of Jews the Reconstructionist movement was designed for, the disaffected who found Jewish life not objectionable, but irrelevant:

One of our special concerns will be for those fellow Jews who appear indifferent and stand aloof, and who do not seem to be rejecting Judaism (as maybe their parents might have done) but who obviously regard membership in the Jewish group as irrelevant. We shall make a sincere effort at inviting such fellow Jews to expose themselves to our specific group experience.

The glimpse of inter-generational characteristics offered in this citation is interesting. It is not the generation that crossed the boundary and left the worlds of traditional Judaism that is being described. The reference is to the next generation, a generation without “Jewish memory,” whose backgrounds would not have included the richness of Jewish experience so important to Lavy Becker personally. In fact, people who formed the founding generation at the Reconstructionist Synagogue did tend to have Jewish backgrounds, as Chapter 4 will illustrate, but for different reasons the chain of continuity with tradition had been broken. The profile Becker describes above would be more characteristic of the next generation in the Reconstructionist Synagogue, although Lightstone found that in the next generation as well “Orthodoxy and its liturgical ritual, is no distant ancestral memory. Rather, traditional Judaism lies in the past of virtually all congregants and is occasionally experienced even in the

present.”¹⁷⁶ People conforming to the profile Lavy Becker sketched were around, and at least some might have joined his synagogue. For the most part though, it would seem that his community, often referred to informally as “the thinking person’s shul,” attracted people for whom the Reconstructionist option offered a way back to something they had known and valued but were unable to identify with in its traditional form because in some way it no longer “made sense.”

I.2 The Place of Lavy Becker’s Shul in the Evolution of the Reconstructionist Movement

From the perspective of the Reconstructionist movement, the timing and naming of the Reconstructionist Synagogue are significant. The arrival in North America of a synagogue whose only declared identification was “Reconstructionist,” at a time when Reconstructionism as a denomination did not yet exist, was, as Lavy Becker surely intended it, a contributing factor among others, in bringing the new denomination into being.

The fact that Lavy Becker wrote of Kaplan’s excitement that “finally, there was a congregation that dared openly to name itself as Reconstructionist,” suggests that Becker himself felt he was making a bold move. There had been Reconstructionist study groups since 1934 when *Judaism as a Civilization* was published; indeed, Becker had led some of the earliest among them.¹⁷⁷ However, Reconstructionism as a denomination did not yet exist and Kaplan was not in favour of it. His vision for the reconstruction of Jewish life was comprehensive and involved conceptually, organizationally, indeed covenantally “reconstituting” world Jewry. He sought a new common understanding to be shared by all Jews and opposed the idea of creating a new denomination, which he thought would be divisive. His followers, among them Lavy Becker,

¹⁷⁶ “Ritual, Reality and Contemporary Society,” 76.

¹⁷⁷ “The Influence of Mordecai M. Kaplan, z”l: part five.” *The Reconstructionist* (July-August 1984) 25.

saw things differently and were pushing Kaplan to resign from the Jewish Theological Seminary where he had taught for over 50 years and free himself to lead the Reconstructionist movement as separate from Conservative Judaism.

There were congregational rabbis who aligned themselves with Reconstructionist thought and were an integral part of the movement.¹⁷⁸ However, until Becker made his move, there were no synagogues “that dared” to use the word Reconstructionist in their names. Why “dare”? Certainly there was a touch of defiance in Lavy Becker’s gesture. Reconstructionism was a controversial movement. The Sabbath and festival prayer books Rabbi Kaplan had developed in the 1940s were so controversial that the Agudat ha-Rabbanim of the United States and Canada pronounced a ban against them and went so far as to burn a copy of his prayer book. Kaplan was acknowledged as an exceptional teacher, a pioneer and a major thinker, but his style upset many people, as did the content of some of his bolder innovations. Kaplan wanted to be controversial and he was, because of the depth of his conviction that change was needed and that acquiescing to inappropriate ways of doing things was dishonest and would prove dysfunctional for Jewish continuity:

However, even though Reconstructionism was indeed controversial, it may be only partly true that before 1960, synagogues had not “dared” to call themselves Reconstructionist. More practically speaking, up until 1960, Kaplan had required synagogues that were part of the Reconstructionist movement to have double affiliations, to join one of the existing denominations, Conservative or Reform, so as not to be contributing to divisiveness. Kaplan’s conviction remained that Jewish life would best be served by spreading his ideas across the denominations, not by starting a new one. However, in 1960, the year that Lavy Becker

¹⁷⁸ Eric Caplan lists Sydney Jacobs in Skokie, Illinois; Abraham Winokur in Pacific Palisades, California; Louis Bunis in Buffalo, New York and William Greenfield in Indianapolis, Indiana, as the four pioneering congregations that together in Buffalo established the Reconstructionist Fellowship of Congregations in 1955. *From Ideology to Liturgy* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2002) 132.

founded his community, the Reconstructionist Fellowship of Congregations met in White Plains, New York, and dropped the demand for double affiliation.

Lavy Becker's decision quickly to incorporate the small "Reconstructionist group" that had answered his call as the "Reconstructionist Synagogue of Montreal" made history, then, by creating the first synagogue to identify itself in this way. Lavy Becker was able to counter anti-Reconstructionist prejudice with a clear, bold name, to support recognition of the movement and also to be free of the burden of having to pay dues to two synagogue associations.¹⁷⁹

In his 1984 article in memory of Kaplan in the *Reconstructionist*, Becker recalls the meeting when he had been among the group who finally persuaded Kaplan to resign from the Jewish Theological Seminary.¹⁸⁰ It was painful, because he didn't like to oppose his "father-figure" Kaplan, whom he describes as "warm, gracious, appreciative" towards him. Nonetheless, the existence of the Montreal synagogue was used as an argument in favour of the new direction:

How painful it was, then, in 1964 in Buffalo, when we, his heartiest supporters and most frustrated ones, determined that we had to break through his shell of resistance. He still wanted to be an influence on those about him – Conservative, Reform, rabbis, laymen. He did not want us to separate ourselves, to form another movement. But we were out in the field. We saw what he did not [...] Our approach to him was strengthened by the simple fact that such a congregation as ours in Montreal could have no affiliation except with other Reconstructionist synagogues. He finally capitulated.¹⁸¹

Lavy Becker was completely in step with the Reconstructionist movement and took a leadership role by founding his synagogue and naming it as he did. The year after Montreal's "Reconstructionist Synagogue" was founded, the movement's association, the Reconstructionist Fellowship of Congregations, changed its name to the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations in order to make a point, as Eric Caplan writes:

¹⁷⁹ Lavy Becker wrote that Kaplan had been "excited" by the fact that "finally, there was a congregation that dared openly to name itself as Reconstructionist." (see above on page 92). This does not exactly fit with the notion that Kaplan was fighting those of his followers who wanted to have Reconstructionism recognized as a denomination.

¹⁸⁰ Lavy Becker's article gives the year for this as 1964, but Eric Caplan's *Ideology to Liturgy* says 1963.

¹⁸¹ "The Influence of Mordecai M. Kaplan, Z"L: Part Five." *The Reconstructionist* (July-August 1984) 25-6.

Meeting in 1961, the Fellowship decided to become a more formal union to foster better intercommunication and more joint projects. It changed its name to the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Fellowships (FRCF), to state clearly that affiliated synagogues were no longer Conservative or Reform congregations whose members were Reconstructionists, but independent Reconstructionist institutions.¹⁸²

In 1968, the Reconstructionist Federation showed its appreciation of Lavy Becker by choosing him as its president, by acclamation.¹⁸³

If Lavy Becker and his synagogue played a role in the evolution of the Reconstructionist movement, equally the movement, with Mordecai Kaplan as founding thinker and dominating presence, and Ira Eisenstein as spokesman and organizer, played a significant part in the life of the synagogue, especially during the first phase of its existence. Rabbi Kaplan visited on several occasions and Ira Eisenstein and his wife Judith, more often. There was a lifelong friendship between Lavy Becker and Ira Eisenstein, who was “Uncle Ira” to Lavy’s children and Kaplan was “warm, gracious and appreciative” towards Lavy. The effect that Kaplan and the Eisensteins had on shul life will be discussed in Chapter 5.

* * *

This chapter has followed Lavy Becker’s life path from its beginnings in Montreal’s downtown Yiddish-speaking community through his departure for New York, where rabbinical studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary introduced him to Mordecai Kaplan and Reconstructionism. Becker’s work for the American Joint Distribution Committee in the American Zone in Germany after the war was seen to have had a profound influence in anchoring his Jewish identity and his commitment to his people. Following Becker’s return to Canada, this commitment was seen to be expressed both on the public stage through his work on the Canadian Jewish Bicentenary and more privately in Montreal through the founding of a

¹⁸² *Ideology to Liturgy*, p. 133.

¹⁸³ Reconstructionist Newsletter, No. 9. September, 1968, p. 1.

synagogue whose format he could call “acceptable” and where the prayer melodies and love of Jewish life that he had inherited from his father could be perpetuated and enjoyed.

By the time Lavy Becker was ready to create a synagogue home for himself and others, he had already seen, done and accomplished a lot, a rich life path was behind him. For others in the founding group, the same held true. Some of the people who joined Lavy, like him, had roots in the downtown community and the immigrant experience. Others found their way to him from other parts of a world in flux. The mix of people and the variety and depth of their backgrounds was an important feature shaping the character and quality of life in Lavy’s Shul. The next chapter will illustrate this point through a series of seven biographical sketches. In addition to their richness and variety, the life paths the portraits depict each shows another important feature of the population of Lavy’s Shul, a defining characteristic of Reconstructionists: both an attachment to Jewish life and some kind of break with traditional observance. The set of reasons why people had broken with and then returned to Jewish practice is a crucial dimension of the life and texture of the shul community and each of the biographical sketches has been chosen to highlight a different one of these reasons.

Chapter Four

IV Every Jew a Universe: The Paths that Led to Lavy's Door

When Lavy Becker put an ad in the Montreal Star in 1960 inviting those interested to be part of a "Reconstructionist group," very few people had heard of Reconstructionism. Not yet a denomination, it was a school of thought that embodied the ideas of Mordecai Kaplan. Among those who had heard of Kaplan many thought that he was "only somebody to be disagreed with" (see below on page 264) and that Reconstructionists were lazy minimalists with little connection to or interest in Jewish life. Misconceptions abounded. Some Jews seemed to enjoy imagining how strange and different Reconstructionists might be: "they're atheist Jews" or "they like Reconstructionism because it's 'easy'" or even "they're not really Jews." This chapter continues the portrait of "Lavy's Shul" by means of seven biographical sketches that suggest what kind of people actually did join Montreal's Reconstructionist Synagogue. One community nickname was the "thinking person's shul" and for the most part the people who joined were individualists who liked to think for themselves. In addition, the people I interviewed had a profile characterized by a connection/disconnection with their Jewish pasts. A connection needed to be there for people to want to join a synagogue in the first place but there also had to have been some kind of disconnection with a traditional past for people to have chosen Lavy's Shul over a neighbourhood synagogue or one their families had been associated with. The seven sketches presented below illustrate a set of reasons why people joined, one or another, or sometimes several of which were shared among all of the people I talked to. It is important to the method and objectives of this study that these "reasons for joining" be presented not as a list of factors but within the human context and meaning of a life path.

Although it is not specified in the profile titles, gender equality was high on the list of reasons for joining and is discussed thematically in Chapter 4. For independent-minded Jewish women and for the many men who wanted their community to include their wives and daughters as equals and to be able to sit together with them, the separation of women from men and the dominance of male roles in traditional synagogue life were unacceptable. Even relatively secular Jewish women, like Kay Wolofsky, wanted to be part of the action on the occasions when they did go to synagogue:

My sense had always been bordering on the sceptical, slash agnostic, slash who needs it ... you know, shul was a very peripheral part of my life, except for the marvellous liturgical melodies of the Fairmount shul (see below on page 309) . But certainly there was nothing in it for me to go with my father to the Ozeroff-er shul. And even skipping ahead some years, there was little in it for me to go with my father to go to the new Ozeroff shul on Bourrett and McLynn. Because the ladies would just chit-chat away, you're not part of things when you're upstairs, you really are isolated when you're up there. I'm not a chit-chatter. If I go to shul I don't want to talk fashion, and I don't want to gossip and I don't want to talk about somebody's hat. I want to focus on what's happening. To this day, I don't like going to Orthodox shuls because to this day the women sit and chit-chat. When you say, 'What page are we at?' They say, 'We don't know what page we're at, what difference does it make?' And that's not me.¹⁸⁴

For people like this, Montreal offered few options in 1960. The one Reform Temple located in Westmount was sufficiently different socially and religiously from anything Jews from Montreal's downtown immigrant community had grown up with that many felt uncomfortable there. There were a couple of Conservative synagogues where there was mixed seating, officially or unofficially, but the choice was very limited and so Lavy Becker's option was attractive (see notes 156 and 160). The gender issue was pivotal for Reuben Brasloff, as is evident in his interview. At the same time, Brasloff captured the character of another typical pathway taken by many who joined the synagogue.

For Reuben Brasloff as for others from the downtown community, Orthodox practice was the way things were done when they were growing up, it was the norm. But the trajectory of

¹⁸⁴ Kay Wolofsky. Interview by author, 22 June 2001.

successful integration into Canadian society took such people out of the old neighbourhood and into a wider world where observing Jewish law was more of a challenge, or where the beliefs they had grown up with began to weaken. Reuben Brasloff provided the wonderful image of “gravel in the gizzard” to refer to the process of getting out in the world and gathering different experiences. For some Orthodox Jews, this process led them to drop their Orthodoxy. Reuben Brasloff always remained comfortable with Orthodox practice but in his case, getting out into the world meant meeting a non-Orthodox young woman from the Canadian prairies and it was for her sake primarily that they joined “Lavy’s Shul.”

For many with Orthodox backgrounds, a major challenge came with the realization that the rest of the world did not honour the Jewish dietary laws, as in an incident recounted by long-time shul member Celia Gordon. Celia’s first job at age 17 was in a button factory in downtown Montreal. It was when she looked over at what the man sitting beside her at the lunch counter was eating, that the beliefs she had grown up with about how God wanted people to eat started to fall apart. As she tells it,

... so I started working, I would go for lunch at a place near the Windsor Hotel. Right next to me was a man sitting eating a ham sandwich, drinking a glass of milk. ... I started waiting, looking, for the Thunder! Lightening! Choking! Death! Nothing happened. Not a thing! Little by little it sort of fell apart for me, when I began to question ...¹⁸⁵

As had been the case for Celia Gordon, so it was for many others: an initial crossing of the forbidden foods threshold, by design, or by accident or even by force of circumstance, was the first step in a move away from Jewish traditional practice.¹⁸⁶ For people like this, Mordecai Kaplan’s philosophy and Lavy’s Shul offered a way back into Jewish community.

¹⁸⁵ Celia Gordon. Interview by author, 1 February, 2001.

¹⁸⁶ Chaim Ron, a member of the Reconstructionist Synagogue after 1976, tells of how, as a young McGill student he joined friends at Ben’s Delicatessen downtown. He found the spare ribs he had there strangely delicious, unlike any he’d had before. The explanation was that, unlike the all-beef spare ribs he’d had on occasion growing up, the

If the Jewish worlds they grew up with fell apart gradually for people like Reuben or Celia, for Holocaust survivors like Erika Barber, their worlds were shattered. Some lost all faith. Others, like Barber, were “very angry at God,” unable to place what had happened within a Jewish world view. In Erika Barber’s case, there was a return to Jewish practice when she met a new husband, married and had a child after the war, but there was no desire to return to the traditional practice that had been left far behind by then. For very many Jews who were not personally subjected to abuse under the Nazis, just the knowledge of what had happened was enough to turn them away from any simplistic notions they may have accepted growing up. Many would have agreed with long-time shul member Rhoda Angel when she said, “I don’t believe. I don’t believe you’re punished if you’re bad and you’re rewarded if you’re good.” People like Rhoda had grown up with beliefs that Kaplan rejected as “supernaturalistic” and such people felt supported and affirmed within Reconstructionism.

Shulamis Yelin’s phrase, that she was “tied by one foot” to the ship on which she did not immigrate to Canada, expresses a particular characteristic of many members of the Reconstructionist Synagogue. Even though Yelin’s image has a personal twist to it, many of her generation shared a sense of being attached to the past by bonds of emotion and nostalgia and at the same time of wanting fully to occupy the present and look to the future in the new country, to be free of the past. Once again, Reconstructionism – where one of Kaplan’s mottos had it that, “the past has a vote, but not a veto” – offered an excellent resolution for this tension.

Herb Winer was unusual among the founding generation in that he grew up as a Reconstructionist. For him, Judaism meant Reconstructionist Judaism, so that when he moved

ones served at Ben’s were pork. Having taken this step in all innocence, however, it was difficult find the motivation to turn back. Interview by author, 14 December, 2000, Montreal, Quebec.

to Montreal, it was basically a question of “looking in the phonebook” ...¹⁸⁷. In later years, Reconstructionists moving to new cities in North America could very well “look in the phone book” for a congenial congregation but when the Winers came to Montreal, most Jews had never heard of Reconstructionism.

Although most people who joined the Reconstructionist synagogue had a good grounding in traditional Jewish practice, this was not the case for all, for different reasons. Many from the downtown community had socialist or communist backgrounds, had been associated with the Labour Zionists, the Bundists or other groups, and came from non-religious or anti-religious backgrounds. For others from different parts of the world, like the Lasry brothers from Morocco, immigration and then acculturation in an open society were paths that led away from Jewish practice. Lavy Becker had such people specifically in mind in his Statement of Intention (see above on page 112):

One of our special concerns will be for those fellow Jews who appear indifferent and stand aloof, and who do not seem to be rejecting Judaism (as maybe their parents might have done) but who obviously regard membership in the Jewish group as irrelevant.

For people at this stage, or for those like the Lasrys who had already decided they wanted to “return to the fold” Lavy Becker’s shul offered a good home. Reconstructionist communities generally tended to be warm and welcoming places because of Kaplan’s focus on Jewish peoplehood and his insistence that people needed to feel a sense of belonging in Jewish life. Lavy’s Shul was a good example of this and the welcome was one the Lasrys appreciated.

For many people, the impetus to join a synagogue is associated with the celebration or mourning of life cycle events: welcoming a baby, celebrating a bar or bat mitzvah or a wedding, mourning a loved one. For such events, people crave community and the rituals

¹⁸⁷ The phrase comes from Herb Winer but is not meant to be taken literally since Winer already knew about Lavy Becker before he arrived in Montreal.

through which these intense life passages are held and structured. The wish to turn to church or synagogue at these times is especially clear in a secular nation-state such as Canada, given the lack of alternative intermediate institutions offering the richness of ritual and community. For many members of Lavy's shul, the ability to mark life cycle events within Jewish community would have been an unstated "given" among the reasons for joining. Ethel Kesler made explicit a universal need not often mentioned when she said that she and her husband joined "really frankly only because we knew that one day we'd need cemetery plots." In fact, Ethel Kesler's story is far richer and more complex than the short title suggests. The Reconstructionist Synagogue would in the end offer, through its sense of warmth and community, a way back, a way for Ethel Kesler to appreciate much about Jewish life that she had rejected a long time before, along with the strict practice of her stern parents.

The final profile is of Barbara Kay, an early baby boomer and so of a different generation from the others portrayed, but someone who was very much part of the Reconstructionist Synagogue community. Born in the affluent postwar Canadian municipality of Forest Hill Village, known in the social scientific literature under the pseudonym "Crestwood Heights," Barb Kay expressed an intellectual curiosity and thoroughly Canadian identity that would become increasingly common at the Reconstructionist Synagogue.

IV.1 Gravel in the Gizzard: Reuben Brasloff

Reuben Brasloff is a longstanding member of Montreal's Reconstructionist Synagogue. He joined during the founding phase and has been part of all stages of the synagogue's growth and development. He was President during the critical period when the community first had to decide what to do about its growth in membership, the critical period with which this study closes. In the decades that followed the 1976 watershed and beyond to the years after 2002, when the community began operating in a completely rebuilt and extended home, Reuben

would become in part the (sometimes critical) memory of the community, especially through his occasional column for the Synagogue Bulletin, “Reconstructing Our Roots.” Alert, articulate, funny, interested in everything and having a vast and detailed store of information at his fingertips, Reuben Brasloff would prove well suited to the role. Born into Montreal’s downtown Eastern European Orthodox Jewish community, his involvement with the Reconstructionist synagogue, as well as in other community initiatives, was solidly grounded in his family background and in the self-help and mutual help ethic of the downtown community he was born into, where, as Reuben put it, “You do first and ask afterwards.”

The path that took Reuben Brasloff from the Orthodox world of his parents to Lavy Becker’s Reconstructionist Synagogue was not animated by rebellion or rejection. Rather it was, at least in part, a function of going out into the world and, while making a living, learning about many of the other colourful threads woven into the tapestry of Judaism or, as Reuben put it, getting a little “gravel in your gizzard.”

* * *

Reuben Brasloff did not know his paternal grandparents, who remained in Eastern Europe. A beautiful memoir about his maternal grandmother and mother was first presented in the Reconstructionist Synagogue in 1996 and was subsequently published in the Synagogue Bulletin. It is an exquisite account of Brasloff’s own connection with “Shabbat Mevorchin” (the Sabbath preceding a new month) through his grandmother and then his mother, and the layers of meaning he has continued to experience in synagogue on this particular Shabbat each year, because of these women.

On his mother’s side, Reuben Brasloff’s story begins with his maternal grandfather’s journey out of Bessarabia to the Yorkshire mines and then on to Montreal, where union activity landed

him in jail for a while and sweatshop work earned him the “fringe benefit” of an early death by tuberculosis:

My maternal grandfather went ahead to establish a home for his family in the new world but he had to stop over in England for a few years to earn a grubstake to keep him going on his task. The only job my grandfather could get there was in the Yorkshire coal mines, where he was exposed to some of the modern social activity, of the Labour movement including working conditions and health services. I remember his English was a mixture of Yiddish and broad Yorkshire! Once established in Montreal he was able to send for his wife and children to come here.

He was a tall man with a fine bearing. The only job he could get in Montreal was as a “presser” in a clothing factory. He was one of the earliest Union organizers for the clothing industry, which consisted pretty well entirely of individually owned enterprises in those days. The owners did use “goons” against the strikers and workers did not get the benefit of the doubt as they do these days; so my grandfather was beat up on occasion and spent some time in jail for his efforts. He was also involved with the Hebrew Sick Benefit Society in Montreal. He died relatively young by today’s standards, of tuberculosis, which was the typical “fringe benefit” for people who worked in the mines and the sweatshops.

Reuben Brasloff’s parents met in Montreal. Religious life in the downtown Orthodox community included, for the family, High Holiday excursions with mother and for Reuben, doing daily battle with the men who tried to snag eligible males to form a quorum for afternoon prayers. On Saturdays, however, pragmatic factors ruled and Reuben’s father went to work, as did Reuben once his teenage years were over. Making a connection with the intimacy of the *shtibels* or small synagogues of his youth, Reuben Brasloff called “Lavy’s Shul,” his “latter day *shteibl*.”

My parents met here. It was an arranged marriage, and it went very well. My dad was a cabinetmaker, a member of the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, and I worked at his bench until after I finished university.

On the high holidays we’d go with my mother to the Chevra Kadisha, which was then on Hutchison Street.¹⁸⁸ The little *shteibl* down the street where I lived is a different story. As teenagers we had to end up there weekday afternoons and

¹⁸⁸ “The Chevra Kadisha Congregation was founded in 1893 as a Burial Society associated with a small synagogue conducting services in a loft on lower St. Laurent Boulevard. The first edifice of the congregation was erected in 1903 on St. Urbain and St. Catherine. In 1912 when Lazar Paperman established his [Jewish funeral home] the congregation ceased being a burial society. When fire destroyed the building in 1920, the synagogue relocated on Jeanne Mance near Milton from 1920 to 1928, and on Hutchinson corner Fairmount from 1928 to 1955.” July 23, 2006. <http://www.ckbj.org/History.htm>

Saturday mornings. These *shteiblach* were always short of a quorum for formal prayers to begin and it was the job of the *shammos* [synagogue caretaker] to make sure that there was a quorum. If you started from the corner of Jeanne Mance and St. Viateur, there were five of these little *shteiblach* within range of that corner so I would have to run the gauntlet of the whole line of *shammosim* to get to my home. The Alouettes could have used them as linebackers!

To save being torn from limb to limb by these enthusiastic recruiters I declared allegiance to Nosach H'ari just a few doors away from where I lived. My friend, who lived just across the way from me, became part of this same "draft." We spent some very interesting "apprenticeship" years here where we eventually became involved in activities such as leading the prayer services, all of which was put to good use in my early years at the Reconstructionist Synagogue. This became my latter day *shteibl*.

By and large, from a religious observance standpoint, most of the people who had to work for a living were de facto "Seventh Day Absentists" as Kaplan called us later on. We had no choice. In those days, the Jewish workingman had to work on the Sabbath. My dad did and so did I. Most factories worked Saturdays until 1P.M. and you had to take a pragmatic approach.

For Reuben Brasloff, as for many others from the Jewish community, the road that led to a university education at McGill took him into a bigger, more diverse, world. For Reuben's generation, this included military service and, in his case, the problematic moment when the ingrained rules of kosher Jewish eating could not be obeyed.

After graduating in mechanical engineering from McGill, Reuben Brasloff went out into the world to practice his profession. Like a free-range chicken pecking here and there all over the yard, Reuben Brasloff accumulated, as he put it, some "gravel in the gizzard," pebbles of perspective that helped him digest the variety of information that came his way. As he traveled, he learned about different parts of Canada and about what he calls the North American Jewish Diaspora – widely scattered communities with very few Jews. Here and there on his travels, Reuben helped spread some seeds of Jewish continuity, as was the case in Cornwall.

When I was at McGill (1939-1944) we were all legally in the service. This involved hours of army training on campus every week and summers at an army base. ... That first summer we spent a month at Farnham, where I went to do my military training. ... This was on the first day of Passover, and I came from a

kosher home. This was quite a culture shock! After graduation, about a year of full time training earned us our commissions.

During the time that I went to McGill, the people from the British West Indies were starting to come here to go to school; they couldn't get back to the Mother Country any more. It was World War II, so they were coming to McGill. So there I was, coming out of my smaller world and meeting people with the beautiful Island accents, and all mixes of colour [...] That gave me contacts afterwards in the early 1950s, I would visit old classmates in the different towns on different Islands, and see how they lived [...]. Some had small Jewish communities, which I also got to know.

For the first couple of years, before I got into private practice here, I worked for a consulting engineer in a number of places across the country. Very often I would be sent to a small place with a very small Jewish community who were almost all merchants. For them a Jew like me, an engineer, was a pretty rare animal, and for me it was an interesting challenge. I organized a youth group in Cornwall, I ran a Sunday school there. Of course I was available to make up a *minyán*. From these experiences I learned about the Jewish community in what I call the North American Diaspora.

Reuben Brasloff's first wife Beatrice grew up as part of the Canadian "Jewish Diaspora," where circumstances precluded conventional Orthodox lifestyles or access to traditional Jewish education. Reuben and Beatrice met in Montreal, married in Edmonton, attended their first Reconstructionist service in Curacao, and then joined Lavy Becker's shul. Here Reuben found a congenial "latter day *shteibl'*" where Lavy Becker prayed using his father's Orthodox *nusach* and Beatrice found a service with the kind of engaged discussion in English that she could become involved with.

The first time I saw a Conservative congregation was when I was married out in Edmonton. I was taken aback that people would drive up to the front door. My first wife came from a little town in Alberta, where her father was a storekeeper. There were no other Jews for 60 miles around and their identification with their Judaism was on the political side, Zionism, as an example.

Beatrice got her Masters in Modern English in 1942, from Washington State University in Seattle. Even though she expected that I would continue my Orthodox practice, I thought it was unfair for me to disappear for 3 or 4 days each year and for a woman of her background and education, sitting behind a *mechitzah* was out of the question. We needed a common ground.

Beatrice and I actually attended our first Reconstructionist service on a Saturday morning in March, 1965, in the beautiful ancient Sephardic style synagogue in Wilhelmstad, Curacao, in the Netherlands West Indies. It is the oldest continually active synagogue in the Western Hemisphere and was Sephardic Orthodox until about the early 1950's. Wilhelmstad also had an active Reform congregation

going back over a hundred years. In time, the indigenous Jewish population diminished to a point where they could not support both houses of worship, so they chose to support the old synagogue and chose Reconstructionism as their common ground. It struck me then, that Reconstructionism meant reasonable compromise to find a middle ground for antithetical forms of Judaism. As well, Beatrice and I had already been to one of Lavy's prayer meetings at the JPPS [Jewish People's and Peretz Schools], so I was able to recognize Rabbi Kaplan's prayer book when we came upon it, there in Curacao.

We had already tasted the Reconstructionist way, then, and when the new building went up in 1967 in Montreal, we decided it was time to "put our money where our mouth was." The use of English meant a great deal to Beatrice. It became meaningful to her, because it was in a reachable language. And then we got involved.

"Getting involved" meant contributing to the Reconstructionist community in a way that was natural to Reuben, and for Beatrice, both contributing to the community and learning about the religious side of Judaism that was missing from her background.

One of Beatrice's contributions was as recording secretary for the synagogue's Women's Group, where the minutes she took stand as a record of that important part of the community's history (see Chapter 5). As Reuben indicates, she would prepare a *Dvar Torah*, a commentary on the Torah portion being read, or help him with his own preparations. Reuben retains still-vibrant memories of these years, when Lavy Becker would go to Florida for the winters and leave a core group in charge.

At that time, Lavy would disappear for the winter. I remember, Herb Winer was President, and I was his Vice. Herb had a beautiful voice, so he'd handle services, or Manny Bach would. Then after services we'd sort of look and see; Herb would say, 'Next week you've got to do us a Dvar Torah!' So that's where Beatrice came in. As well, she became my "research assistant" when it was my turn to prepare a Dvar Torah.

Reuben Brasloff joined the Reconstructionist synagogue as a way to accommodate both himself and Beatrice, and it was easy for them both to become involved.

But Reuben Brasloff has always been comfortable with any of the "flavours," as he puts it, of Judaism. During the third phase of the Reconstructionist Synagogue's existence, a brand new

building was constructed on the site of the old, in 2001. Concurrently, construction began just down the road on the same small, quiet, neighbourhood street, of the Chabad Lubavitch Montreal Torah Centre (MTC). Orthodox practice at the MTC being towards the other end of the spectrum from liberal Reconstructionism, the juxtaposition of the two institutions barely a half block apart has stimulated plenty of curiosity on both sides. The Lubavitch Chassidim would tend to think of a liberal synagogue as a strange, Church-like place, having little to do with real Judaism; for Reconstructionist Synagogue members, “the Orthodox” tend to be the “Other” against which “we” articulate our identity. However, because of his comfort with all “flavours”, Reuben enjoys engaging passing Lubavitchers in conversation. One incident he recounts leaves a charming image of Reuben Brasloff deep in conversation, a conversation made easier because Reuben still speaks the language of Orthodoxy, as he put it “I came their way.”

Last summer shortly after services one Saturday, there was a gaggle of Lubavitchers walking home. They stopped to look briefly at our synagogue, so I said to one of the young men, “You won’t be struck down, go in and look!” I’m older than any of them. He went in, he looked. I said, “Well?” He said, “It looks like a synagogue”

In fact this note is anachronistic here since it relates to a time period beyond the “Lavy’s Shul” years. It is included because it illustrates Reuben Brasloff’s comfort in speaking the language of Orthodoxy and his delight in engaging the young *hasidim*—both characteristics of Reconstructionists of the generation of Lavy’s shul. Had he known of it, Kaplan would no doubt have been delighted at this embodiment of his wish to create dialogue among all Jews under the banner of a common peoplehood. It should be noted as well that the presence of the Montreal Torah Centre, a rather showy definitively Jewish institution, on the same block as the Reconstructionist Synagogue demonstrates how much times had changed from the days when Lavy Becker decided to prove a point about equal rights for Jews by establishing the first synagogue in Hampstead. Finally, the young man’s comment that “it looks like a synagogue”

refers to the completely rebuilt Reconstructionist building, which indeed looks much more “like a synagogue”, both outside and in, than did the first building, another sign of changing times.

* * *

Reuben Brasloff's first wife Beatrice died of cancer in September of 1974. During her last weeks in July and August she and Reuben would come alone on weekday afternoons,

to our small, modest shul, to sit and meditate quietly in the presence of the Ark and in the glow of daylight filtering through the stained glass windows. This added an unusual sense of peace and tranquility during these, her last days. It was the intimacy of the *shteibl* revisited.

A few years later Reuben met Phyllis Beer, a member of the *shul* who was a single mother with a teen-age son, whom Reuben knew from his work with the Synagogue's youth program. Among her other activities in the synagogue, Phyllis was the editor, compositor and printer (on an old Gestetner) of the Bulletin in the early days. The marriage of Reuben Brasloff and Phyllis Beer was the first to be performed by Ron Aigen, the new young rabbi hired in 1976, as “Lavy's Shul” crossed the threshold into its next phase of development.

IV.2 Tied by One Foot: Shulamis Yelin

I never sat ‘unter die grininka baimelakh,’ [beneath the little green trees,] which our Yiddish song commemorates. I was never in the *shtetl* of our forbearers to which those trees refer. Yet, as I have often said, I was ‘tied by one foot’ to the boat on which I did *not* come, the boat which brought my parents to America to seek a new life, a better life than they and their ancestors had known in Russia. My earliest memories were embedded in their memories; my earliest celebrations, a celebration of their celebrations from another time, another place, mythical or geographical, a place which incorporated a people and an experience I would only recognize from our poets and story-tellers, from history books and from researched columns in the press. Their customs and innuendoes were unknown to the teachers of the Protestant Public School I attended five hours a day, and my most persistent sense of belonging still rests in the distilled music of their voices and in the tastes and smells of their transported ways.¹⁸⁹

Shulamis Borodensky Yelin was one of the core group involved with the Reconstructionist Synagogue throughout the Lavy Becker years, beginning in 1960 when she was in her mid-forties. She remained an active member, involved in the life and development of the community until a fall in early June 2001 put her in hospital, where she died later that month at age 89. Over the course of the intervening 42 years, “Shulamis”¹⁹⁰ as she came to be known widely in the community and the city, developed and blossomed as a writer, spurred on by painful personal losses and a near brush with death. Her life and work have recently been

¹⁸⁹ I am grateful to Brett Hooton for tracking down this reference to one of the many sayings Shulamis Yelin coined and then quoted herself on repeatedly. Hooton found this in an undated and unpublished essay, “The Writer as Cultural Repository” in the Jewish Public Library archives. His guess is that it was probably written in the mid-1970s, because Shulamis echoes the essay on several occasions in the speech she gave at the launching of *Seeded in Sinai* at the Jewish Public Library in October, 1975. (Brett Hooton, telephone conversation with author).

¹⁹⁰ Her story “I Find My Jewish Name” tells a classic immigrant saga about names, in this case, how the parents thought they were doing their child a favour by giving her the name “Sophie.” When she started attending the Jewish Peretz Shule, little Sophie burst into tears, “Everyone else has a Jewish name!” Her mother told her “Your name is Shulamis, for my father Shloime. ... [but] We live in Canada. We wanted you to have an English name for school. ...” The story is part of the highly successful anthology *Shulamis: Stories from a Montreal Childhood* (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1983), which also includes the popular story “I Unroll Denie in School” and the account of Shulamis’ inspiration to tell the Irish principal of Strathearn School that her little sister’s English name was Dorothy, after Dorothy Gish from the movies. In early shul bulletins however Shulamis appears as Shulamith, a Hebraized form of her name. It could be that her trip to Israel in the early 1960s (reported in her interview below) motivated this shift.

studied by Brett Hooton, who concludes that Shulamis Yelin was “one of the richest and most fascinating personalities in the history of Canadian literature.”¹⁹¹

* * *

The path that led Shulamis Yelin to the Reconstructionist Synagogue in Montreal started in Chernobyl, Ukraine, home of her parents and grandparents.¹⁹² It was in Chernobyl that a break came with Orthodox practice when her father, responding to the currents of change flowing through Eastern Europe, rebelled and became a socialist. A vivid image of the *shtetl* in transition involves Shulamis’ father hiding his socialist literature in the henhouse kept by his mother, whom Shulamis would later describe as a “virtuous Jewish daughter.” The girlfriend and later wife of Shulamis’ father also became a socialist but continued to keep Jewish practice alive through the *kasbrut* of her kitchen, until her husband succeeded in “re-educating” her.

Shulamis Yelin’s parents emigrated to America, along with her father’s family but her father was killed in an accident when she was an infant and her mother soon married her father’s brother. Her maternal grandmother refused to leave Chernobyl because she could not bear to leave “her graves.”¹⁹³ Due to her mother’s illness, Shulamis spent her early years with a foot in each world, the traditional Orthodoxy of her paternal grandmother, and the “open-minded” socialist home of her parents.

¹⁹¹ “Cymballed in a Special Key: The Uncollected and Unpublished Poetry of Shulamis Yelin” M.A. diss., Department of English, McGill University, January 2005, p. 47.

¹⁹² Although the memories here are gentle and tinged with nostalgia, during the time that I was interviewing and conversing with Shulamis, she wrote a “triptych” of fierce poems focusing on Chernobyl and its nuclear accident. These poems begin with “mutant mice” with “gargoyle heads” thriving in post-nuclear Chernobyl. The poems go on to speak of a “Rage of light” visited by a vengeful, tired, god on those who exterminated the Jews from the town where once “Yiddish warmed the hearts / of Baal Shem’s children” (*Where All Her Wars Are Marked*, 11-13)

¹⁹³ In the interview passage cited below from July 10, 2000, Shulamis expresses astonishment at the superstitious, old-world Jewish practices that would tie her grandmother to her graves. Not quite a year later, a year before she died, Shulamis Yelin wrote a poem entitled “I Visit My Graves,” the last of the poems in Brett Hooton’s collection “Cymballed in a Special Key,” a poem Hooton dates at March 26, 2001. “I Visit My Graves” is an almost mystical meditation in which voices “wreathed in memory” come to comfort Shulamis as she looks “to the far horizons of this / City of the Dead” ... “All here—far from the sounds, / tastes, and smells of their beginnings.” Hooton, 99.

I don't know beyond my mother's mother in Chernobyl, and my grandmother here. I know that they lived there for generations. My grandmother said, 'I can't go to America, because how can I leave my graves.' My graves! And that's the connection with the past. You know in *The Dybbuk* there is a scene where the girl is going to be married with someone she doesn't really want to marry. They go to the cemetery to ask the mother's blessing. Jews still do that.

Our parents had broken away from the old ways. The dry coagulation of the establishment religion. And they didn't want any part of it. The winds were blowing, of the Enlightenment, this was a world that was a cauldron.

... You see I had two fathers, a birth father and papa. When I was five months old, my birth father was killed. My mother married her husband's younger brother, he was six years younger than my mother. He told me he did it because he didn't want Aaron's child to be brought up by a stranger. I couldn't have had a better father.

My birth father was a leader in Chernobyl, where they all lived, his family and my mother's family. My grandfather was an asthmatic, so my grandmother had to make a living, which was quite normal in small towns among Jews. I remember my Bubbie used to say that she was always scared because my father and his friends would hide all this [socialist] literature in the hen house that she kept, to make a living. She was always terrified that the police would come, the squealers would come, and they would find it.

My mother became a socialist together with her boyfriend, my birth father, in Chernobyl; and they influenced my papa, who was just a kid! How did he learn to write? He wasn't sent to *heder*, but he was bright. He used to hear what the older children were saying and so he copied on the wooden table, what they wrote. My Bubbie came in one day, and my Zayde, and they said, 'Who wrote that?' And Feivel said, 'I did.' So they said, 'Okay, guess you better go to *heder*.' He learned Russian by himself. And he certainly learned English here, from the papers. Not only that, he learned designing by himself, he was a bit of a tailor.

My father's parents came here in 1910, just after the Russo-Japanese war. When my father died—he was the oldest son, the apple of their eye—the doctor said 'Why don't you go to live in California, it will be better for your wife.' But papa went to discuss it with his mother and his mother said, 'What, break up the family! Isn't it enough that I've already lost one, am I going to lose the second?'

I adored my mother because she had that "light" feeling. She liked *yonteff*, she liked celebration, she liked to sing – when she was well. You know she was very sick ... My mother was an invalid for thirty years, she would bleed, half a cup of blood, three times a week. They thought it was TB.¹⁹⁴ She wasn't able to look after me in the beginning so I grew up in my Bubbie's house for the first six or seven years.

My father was the one who rebelled. His father was a very severe father so of course, he rebelled. 'We're socialists, we don't need this claptrap.' There was occasionally a fracas between my father and my mother. He wanted to break this religious thing, because his father had made it such a heavy weight on him. The

¹⁹⁴ Brett Hooton's collection includes a lovely poem, written by Shulamis at age 14 that would appear to relate to her response to her mother's illness. It was published in the English section of the *Keneder Odler* and entitled "The Fair Sad Maid."

only time I heard my parents have any kind of dispute was when he took the *fleishike* knife to butter his bread ... he did it on purpose, he was trying to re-educate my mother. Well of course in time she gave in.

I grew up in a very open-minded house. My parents home was not a religious home, though they were both very Jewish. My father never denied being a Jew at any time. But because of his own very severe father and the thinking at the time, he hated everything that had to do with shul. My mother wasn't religious, but she loved ritual. And she had a strong bent towards the Hasidic; I'm sure I got it from her side.

In my earliest childhood, in my grandmother's house, with my Bubbie, I grew up in a very religious, Orthodox milieu. My Bubbie was an honest, virtuous Jewish daughter. She influenced my life. She was my role model. She and my father were the two role models. He was an idealist, a stoic. In my Bubbie's house, everything was attached to the holidays and to Shabbat. Saturday night was the big night when all the *landskoyt* came and there was joy, and storytelling and relationship and mother had baked the great big *kugels* and *kuchens* and everything. Celebration obviously comes out of my Bubbie's house.¹⁹⁵

* * *

The world of Shulamis' grandmother and that of her parents represented two facets of the multi-faceted downtown Montreal Jewish community in the period between the wars: the traditional Eastern European Orthodox and the Labour Zionist. It was an important characteristic of the diversity of "Lavy's Shul" that people from both sub-communities were welcomed and felt at home. As well, Shulamis' life was touched in different ways by Quebec's two dominant cultural groups, the francophone Catholics and the English-speaking Protestants. For the young child, the anti-Semitism of both groups was not connected with the fun to be derived by witnessing the celebrations of each. These took the form respectively of the St. Jean Baptiste Day and the Santa Claus parades. Later on, Shulamis had less to do with the Catholic group, which appeared to be and was resolutely closed to Jews.

Have I ever been to a St. Jean Baptiste Day parade? For years! Of course. It was to us the same as in later years the Santa Claus parade. It had nothing to do with [nationalism or] religion as far as we were concerned. That's what we used to do. For years, my goodness. I took my little sister. We stood on Main street, near Prince Arthur, and watched the floats go by. I couldn't tell you what was in the

¹⁹⁵ See Yelin's *Stories of a Montreal Childhood* for further evocations of her grandmother.

floats, but they were very colourful, and we knew we had to be there. Of course, it was wonderful.

... [As Jews] we were the outsiders. Don't forget how closed French Canadian society was. It was completely closed; I mean anti-Semitism was the order of the day. Were the WASP crowd any better? Of course not, but most of us had very little to do with that bunch. The Anglos were "classy;" they had the banks, the Eaton's, and the French Canadians were the peasants from the country as far as we were concerned. You've read *The Tin Flute*, wonderful book. Poverty that they [the French Canadians from the country] brought with them [when they moved to Montreal], and still the hangover of the Church, that didn't let them go.¹⁹⁶ ... Yes, there was a French Canadian elite. Of course there was, in *Two Solitudes* you see that. There were the lawyers and the notaries – but they went to the Jews for doctors ... magic ... Jews knew magic.

If the French-speaking Catholic community was closed to the immigrant Jews, who in any case were not interested in entering it, the "classy" anglophone Protestant community was different, since it was attractive to upwardly mobile Jews. It remained only half-closed to the Uptown Jews who had integrated into it. It was far more closed to the Downtown Jews, but still not entirely so, as when Shulamis and her friend wanted to work as Kindergarten teachers for the Protestant School Board.

I remember when I was in Grade 11 at Baron Byng – all the brains were there, it was a 99.9 percent Jewish school. In Grade 11 there was a letter from the P.S.B.G.M. saying that they needed Kindergarten teachers. Anne Cohen and I both went down to apply for the job. The principal said 'BO-RO-DEN-SKY, CO-HEN, you're Jewish, aren't you. Yes. Well, how can you ... you can't do that! You'll never be able to tell the Christmas story properly!' I told it for 35 years, I told it better than many Christian teachers!

Montreal High School didn't allow Jews as students. Later, you had to have a certain address, because it was the *crème de la crème* you know, among the Anglos. I had a friend, she got caught going to Montreal High though she didn't have "the right address" and she had to go to another school. It was one of the girls, a *landsman* of my parents, who wanted her to be "fancy." Her parents decided she should go there and she would marry a rich man, with class. So she went to Montreal High, but she was sent elsewhere.

Alongside her education in the Protestant School Board system, Shulamis attended afternoon school in Yiddish at the Peretz Shule, until she felt the need for a more stimulating social

¹⁹⁶ The views expressed here are not historically nuanced, as the "Anglos" included working class English speaking people ... the perception from the downtown Jewish perspective is nonetheless interesting.

life.¹⁹⁷ The importance of different ideologies within the Zionist movement of the time is illustrated by the fact that when the restless adolescent Shulamis wanted to join the Young Judea youth group, in which the poet A.M. Klein¹⁹⁸ was active, her teacher Jacob Zipper said she should not join, as it was “too Zionist.”

I had grown up in the *shule*, in the Peretz Shule, but I had to fall out, by the time I was 14, 15 and I needed a social life, there were just little girls around, there were no boys. I had wanted to join Young Judea, but my teacher Jacob Zipper said NO! It was too Zionist, it was not Labour Zionist. So I really was at a loss. High school didn't interest me. I taught literature to the other students around me, they asked me, 'Shulamis could you explain this to us?' ... When I started writing poetry, I was published every Sunday in Auntie Naomi's column [in the *Keneder Odler*]. Young people would write in letters to her, like a fan club. It was a real community paper. ... We later formed a little group, ten of us, five girls, five boys, writers, musicians, bright, bright kids.

The different attractions of Socialists and Zionists and of various Zionist options continued through Shulamis' youth and young adulthood. As a curious, adventurous young woman, with a strong and active mind, Shulamis was able to experience both the Soviet Union and the young Israeli state. Shulamis was also accumulating admirers, something she continued to do till the end of her life.

When I was 19, 20, I was teaching already. The nice thing to do was to be a Leftist, in those days. As a matter of fact when I had the choice, to go to Palestine or to go to Russia, I took the trip to Russia, in 1936/37. Others had already been, and they came back with glowing stories. Of course I had a marvellous time. It was cheap, six weeks, \$600, it was amazing, amazing.

Did they indoctrinate me? No, no one could indoctrinate me, but of course they tried. I adored the children's palaces, they had the youth palaces. Nothing was too good for the children. Of course those were the chosen children. And I was thrilled with the parades of multi-cultural costuming. Marvellous parades. I have some pictures from that trip. Then a week on the Black Sea. That was where the head of the clinic fell in love with me and followed me around wherever I went. Then the sad part, that I was not allowed to speak, lest my “outsider” voice be heard. It was the time of the Russian doctors' trials. Stalin was slaughtering right and left. Danya was a doctor and he couldn't afford to be seen with an outsider. He wanted me to stay, get me a visa. I thought I would stay a year. I wanted to get away from home by that time. I thought I would teach, he would get me a job. As a matter of fact he was wiped out. It's a very interesting story ...

¹⁹⁷ See Hooton, *Cymballed in a Special Key*, 12-13.

¹⁹⁸ A.M. Klein was perhaps the strongest influence on Shulamis Yelin's poetry.

Shulamis Yelin felt and struggled with the many issues of Jewish identity that were part of her moment in time. A strong, curious, independent-minded woman, she thought for herself and sought answers. One burning issue she confronted as a girl was whether to give her heart to the Soviet Union and its promise of universal equality and respect for all, or to the Zionist dream.

Obviously I was hungry for something ... Sometime in the 40s, I was part of a women's group, our group – I didn't realise to what degree they were Leftists. I knew they were honest, they were thinking. I knew they wanted a better world, like my father did. ... But I certainly didn't want to cling to the Soviet Union. ... I remember winning a prize for my costume, at a Purim Ball. What did I have? It was a Labour Zionist Ball, a Purim Ball. I had a friend of mine make me two circles of the globe. One that had the Soviet Union, the other that had Palestine and the Middle East. I wore it like a sandwich board. And the question was, Where to? Was Birabadjan my answer, or was that left over, dried out, sad Palestine my answer? And I won first prize. My heart was in Palestine, but I didn't dare show it.

Although she says she was shy when she was young, Shulamis Yelin developed a powerfully forthright manner as she matured. Some of her style may have been modeled on the interesting people she met while she was growing up, including feminist, anarchist Emma Goldman, whom she liked and admired.

... I knew Emma Goldman quite well. I was invited to her house. She used to come here to lecture, to the Workmen's Circle, my parents were socialists in the Workmen's Circle. She was quite a gal, not Communist but Anarchist. I enjoyed her. I always brought her chocolate-covered almonds, because I had read in her biography that she liked them. And when I came to New York I had to see her, and she sent me to meet her nephew and niece and so on and so forth. It was nice. I was pleased. I knew a lot of interesting people when I was growing up, but I was very shy. I didn't have the strength and the audacity to be *me* then. I guess I didn't yet really know who I was.

Shulamis Yelin cared for an invalid husband for some 13 years, keeping him at home despite the social workers' advice that she institutionalize him. Still, she managed to live intensely and to find her way to the nerve centers of the Jewish world, as was the case in the early 1960s when she was sent to Israel as a young leader. Although she became a well-known character in Jewish Montreal and a recognized and celebrated author, perhaps if she had not had the

responsibilities she did have at home, Shulamis Yelin would have been able to take a larger leadership role in Jewish life.

In 1961 I was among 14 people sent by the Histadrut to do leadership training in Israel. There was somebody chasing me to marry him. I said no, I had to leave. We went there and stayed in Petach Tikva, which had just been completed. All the “biggies” came to talk to us “nothings.” Peres. Ben Gurion. Abba Eban. All of them, I mean all of them, every day there was someone different. We were there 3 weeks. It was really very high. We were also taken to see the country, the little country that it was then. Then we came back to give reports, inspire others.

* * *

The year that the Reconstructionist Synagogue was founded, 1960, fell in the middle of the most difficult decades in Shulamis Yelin’s life. Her daughter was young, her husband had been an invalid for a decade, her one sister had died and she was both working teaching high school and studying for a Masters degree. Although she had known the world of Orthodox Jewish practice in her grandmother’s home as a child, she had grown up in a non-observant Labour Zionist family and had married a man who had left his family’s traditional practice behind. The likelihood of Shulamis Yelin joining a synagogue would have seemed to be very slight. An early, undated membership form in the synagogue archives gives “No” as answer to “Have you been a member at another synagogue?” In answer to the question “Why did you choose to join the Reconstructionist Synagogue,” Shulamis Yelin’s form reads “Lavy Becker’s influence falling on my natural mode of thinking in religion.” Her answer when we spoke was livelier:

Lavy. It was Lavy. He was an absolutely fascinating man. He really had charisma. Ugly. An ugly, charismatic man. Full of stories, and charm, and he knew how to be charming. So, I had no religion, I had no background. My husband was a scholar, and his father was a child prodigy, a rabbi; but my husband broke away from it like his generation broke away from it. They became socialists, Labour Zionists.

We [the fledgling Reconstructionist Synagogue group] met in the Folk Shule, on Saturdays and high holidays. . . . Lavy never pretended to be a great scholar. All his sermons were about what was happening in the community, outside.

Having joined, Shulamis Yelin became very involved with the young community. Bulletins from the years 1968 to 1973 include a poem of Shulamis Yelin’s, “Prayer for Courage”, a letter

from her to the Krashinskys, founding members who had moved to Israel, and notes about “An Evening of Jewish Music” that she had animated. The Bulletins also record that Shulamis gave talks on a number of topics that combined her interests in literature, folklore and Jewish identity, including “Wiesel and Bellow, Two Roads Home” “Comparative Themes in Literature” “Klein, Jew Without a Ghetto” and “Many Hamans.” It is also recorded that Shulamis was a first co-chair of the Program Committee (along with Herb Winer), a role well suited to a woman of her passionate curiosity and intellect. Before becoming the Bulletin’s second editor, Shulamis continued as Program Chair from the convalescent hospital where she spent close to nine months following a near-fatal, life-changing car accident in 1969. During the period of her convalescence, the community that had become hers and that she had played an important role in, offered her sustained, solid support, which she credits with helping her to live through a painful and drawn-out recovery. As well, it was during this period that Shulamis Yelin began again to write poetry intensively, starting with a poem dedicated to the daughter of shul members and friends Mary and Manny Bach.

When I was in that terrible accident, it was the shul that helped me get well. I was surrounded by so much love, as I said, I was ashamed to die. Jack and Kay [Wolofsky] were very devoted. And Heather [Drazner] and at that time her husband. They had a contest, who would bring me home, and they had a lottery. Heather won, and brought me a fur coat to keep me warm. I have pictures of me with Jack and her and her husband around my table with the tea service, etc.

There was so much love. At Rosh Hashanah, people came to sit with me so I wouldn’t be alone. One of my Gentile friends said I’ll come and sit with you for Yom Kippur so your Jewish friends can go to synagogue. In the 9 months when I was in the Montreal General there wasn’t a day when I didn’t have people. People I didn’t know came to sit with me and tell me their sad stories. I have a poem about it. Nice things happened there.

You see it was in the hospital that I wrote my first poem, it was to Mary Bach’s daughter, because I hadn’t written in all those years. I was torn between Yiddish and English. Kayla Bach was engaged to be married, such a silent girl. They were good friends to me. In fact Manny had asked me to marry him, in front of my mother, that was earlier, when I was a young girl. Kayla came to tell me she was going to be married. Knowing how anti-grownup young people were in the sixties

I was so excited. I wrote “A Song of Ascents for *Kalah*.”¹⁹⁹ It was set to music by Samuel Levitan, who was a good composer. And it was sung at her wedding by a friend of hers, a well-known soprano. Lavy was the master of ceremonies, he did the service. Mary brought me a picture of the score that Sam had made, and the bride’s picture and the score was with the words, I have it at home.

When she got out of the hospital, Shulamis again became an involved and engaged member of the shul community. Along with the others, she enjoyed the occasions when Mordecai Kaplan came to visit, appreciating his wit and intensity and in addition, she was part of a smaller group who spent a little time with him on one occasion:

The Reconstructionist Foundation had a conference, to honour [Kaplan] on his 85th birthday. He got up – he was so bright-- he said ‘Ladies and gentlemen you see me, I am a young man, just out of the theological seminary,’ (because he had finally decided to leave). We walked together, and I tried to keep up with him but he walked faster than I did, he was so agile. Anyway, he had a delicious sense of humour. I had lunch at their house one day. He was on his way to Ottawa, and his theme was, the three dicta of Hillel. If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, who am I? If not now, when? He was looking for one word for each. We were all so smart, trying to find the words. So I had lunch with them when he was on his way back and I said what did you decide? He said it was very easy: selfhood, peoplehood, action. So that was my inheritance with Kaplan. He came here on different occasions. He spoke from the pulpit.

In the mid-1970s the issue of a growing membership forced a debate in the shul community about what to do, whether to expand the facilities and continue growing, or not. Shulamis felt that it would be better to spawn a second congregation or *havurah* and argued against expansion. Nonetheless, when the extension was completed and the first paid rabbi hired, Shulamis remained very much part of the action and was fond of the new young rabbi. Over the decades, though, the baby boom generation took over and Shulamis and others from the original group moved increasingly to the sidelines, although the shul continued to be their community, a place to feel at home, in body, mind and spirit:

.... I think [the reason I keep coming to synagogue is] my own need to be part of a spiritual community. In a place where the Torah is read. Where the mind is open for information, for discussion, where there are people I love. Where people love me. I don’t have to win the beauty contest or the popularity contest. I just have to

¹⁹⁹ *Kalah* in Hebrew means “bride” and so Yelin’s poem plays on the young women’s name, Kayla. “Song of Ascents” is the label given to some of the Biblical Psalms.

feel that there are people to whom it matters. Who matter to me. I've cried there, nobody knew why; I've been depressed there, God knows. I haven't taken my full role there, over the years, personal reasons. ... But I've always been part of it.

Both the pain beneath the surface and the pleasure she continued to find in coming to shul are echoed in Brett Hooton's appreciation of Shulamis Yelin. Hooton finds a deep rupture at the centre of Yelin's life and work, with private and public selves existing in tension and contradiction, so that she was "both an erudite artist, who survived a lifetime of emotional hardship and a near-fatal car accident before producing two extraordinary collections of Jewish-Canadian literature, and a lonely eccentric who lived in her own world ..." As the phrase chosen to head this section suggests, duality also marked Shulamis Yelin's relationship with her past, personal and communal. When Yelin described herself as being "tied by one foot" to the ship on which, as the Montreal-born daughter of immigrants, she did *not* come, her intention seems to have been to emphasize her attachment to the Yiddish-speaking world of her childhood, placing a positive value on her "most persistent sense of belonging" and the cozy nostalgia that emanated from the "distilled music of their voices and [...] the tastes and smells of their transported ways." However, the image she coined is a strange one, and the tied foot suggests a tether or a shackle as much as it does a fond attachment.

The peculiar twist in this image of being "tied by one foot" relates to the individuality of its author, but the general situation was one that Reconstructionism was created to address: the double reality of wanting to honour the past and of needing to be free of it, in order fully to embrace the present. Certainly for a woman like Shulamis Yelin, fiercely independent-minded, agnostic or a-theistic in any traditional sense, the Reconstructionist Synagogue was the only synagogue option that Montreal offered. For Shulamis as for many others, it was Lavy Becker himself, with his wide-ranging and curious mind, his kindness and love of people, his strong Jewish identity and also his rebellious streak, that drew her in initially. Until the end of her life, Shulamis Yelin, like Lavy Becker himself and others from the founding generation, remained a

regular presence on Shabbat morning. For Shulamis, the Reconstructionist Synagogue was a place to be together with other Jews in a context of Jewish meaning and continuity, a place for the heart to come into light:

One of my favourite moments in the synagogue is when I sit, and the light comes in from the stained glass windows, and there are either flowers or candles; the color of the flowers changes and the color of the candles change, with the light coming in. And I point out to the people near me, 'Look at the light, look at the light!' And of course when it comes in from the further side, and the light comes in on the carpet, and there's a rainbow on the carpet. That to me is spirit. ... I think that when I come there, my heart comes into light. I'm lonely, I'm at home. I come there, not that I get so much attention [...] But the fact is that when I come there I feel, this is home, there are people around me, I'm not alone.

IV.3 Return to the Fold: The Lasry Brothers

The Lasry brothers, Pierre and Jean-Claude, arrived in Montreal from Casablanca in 1957 with their father, followed a few months later by their mother. This put them at the beginning of the migration of French-speaking Sephardic Jews who, over the next 20 years, would change the tenor and texture of Jewish life in Montreal as much as the Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jews did when they arrived. A year apart in age, slightly built and unassuming, both Lasrys are emotionally and psychologically powerful men and each has had a significant impact on the cultural life of Montreal and beyond, Jewish and non-Jewish, Pierre as a successful documentary film-maker and author and Jean-Claude as a respected psychotherapist, clinician and researcher, and an important role-player in the Sephardic Community of Quebec. Although the Reconstructionist synagogue entered the lives of both Lasrys, it seems to have been more important for Jean-Claude, who was an important part of the community for several years in its first phase. For Jean-Claude as a young francophone Moroccan wanting to re-connect with Jewish life, before the Montreal Sephardic community was organized, the Reconstructionist synagogue offered community, a warm welcome and a context to relate to and engage with. When, after spending some years in New York, Pierre arrived back in Montreal at "his [older] brother's synagogue," it was with his helmet and on his motorcycle, a

presence first-generation members still speak of. Although he was not involved for as long as his brother was, Pierre Lasry also contributed to the program at the synagogue on a number of occasions.

IV.3.1 Jean-Claude Lasry

When Moroccan independence was declared, Jean-Claude Lasry was of an age to be taken into the army but felt no desire to serve a country he did not feel part of. He became anxious, but luckily his father had already applied for visas to Canada and father and sons were able to leave.²⁰⁰ Once in Montreal, Jean-Claude addressed himself to a number of life issues for a young man, making a living and meeting girls, followed by the further question of going back to school:

At the time of independence, I was of age to go into the army. At some point in January of 1957, there was a rumour that Moroccan Jews would be enlisted into the Moroccan army. I didn't see myself as a Moroccan, I didn't know that Morocco had an army. ... we had our passports, we were lucky, we had a visa for Canada. I remember that I had nightmares about escaping, through Tangiers, through the sea and all that. I told my father, 'I don't want to stay.' The three of us left Casablanca, we left the [hairdressing] salon to my mother and her brother, my uncle, to take care of it and to sell it. She followed about two months after.

When we got to Montreal, I was 20, my brother was 19 and we wanted to go out and meet girls. We went to the Y at that time on Mount Royal and Park Avenue.²⁰¹ We went on Saturday nights, to the teenage dances; we went once, twice or three times, but no girls wanted to dance with us because we looked so different. We looked like either Italians, or ... or something, something rather strange. The girls didn't want to dance with *goyim* (as they understood it), so we decided after a few unsuccessful tries not to go back [...]

When I arrived I also was a hairdresser, like my father. We were working in Verdun with someone a contact had sent us to. I was working there as a hairdresser. We had young French Canadian customers who, *au contraire*, were very interested in us! Where did we come from, why were we here and so on. So, very quickly, we decided to go out with girls who wanted to be with us. This lasted quite a few years.

I had stopped my studies in Morocco just before first year university in order to go into hairdressing. I was interested in a quiet life, going fishing, going to the sea.

²⁰⁰ Lasry senior had answered an ad from a Quebec salon in one of the hairdressers' trade publications he was in the habit of reading. It was with the idea of following through on this that he applied for visas.

²⁰¹ The Y referred to is today the YM-YWHA, founded in 1910 as the Young Men's Hebrew Association. See also note 102 page 83.

However, after a while working as a hairdresser with my father in Montreal, I thought I'd better go back to school.

I started slowly, by going to Concordia, taking some courses in philosophy, just for the sake of philosophy.²⁰² There was a young Jewish assistant professor whom I became sort of friends with, who encouraged me in going back to school. The following year I did go back but worked as a hairdresser Thursday, Friday and Saturday. Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday I studied at home. I had the first year baccalaureate from France and wanted to do the second year.

I had established a connection with College Stanislas, with a professor of philosophy there, a priest. I told him: 'I want to study in parallel with the students, you tell me what the books are and I'll be studying on the side.' This priest gave me a few essays to write and he read them over for me, he corrected them; he also put me in touch with a second-year French Canadian student. I studied mathematics, chemistry, physics, whatever had to be studied.

I was all alone, coming out of nowhere. The baccalaureate exam was administered by the French embassy in Canada. When they published the results, they listed the people who passed the exams by name, and by ranking. (Jean-Claude becomes emotional as he remembers. I ask: *Where were you in this ranking?* He holds up one finger. He had come first. An immigrant hairdresser from Morocco. *Bless that priest for seeing your potential, for making that bridge for you, into the culture.*)

After coming first in the baccalaureate exams, Jean-Claude decided to apply to university. First he thought he would become a lawyer, but he showed an interest in psychology and was encouraged to pursue what became a successful professional path. At the same time, as was the case for his younger brother, life pushed Jean-Claude back towards Jewish community, though for different reasons.

All this time I had French Canadian girlfriends, and when I went into university I also had French Canadian girlfriends. I think in my third year, I came close to getting married to a French Canadian girl. As a matter of fact, I wanted to get married but she didn't, thank Heavens. After that I decided that this had been a close call and I'd better be careful next time, that it was time to come back to the fold.

Then, how do you go back to the fold? I didn't go to any synagogue. With my father in those days, we lived downtown and we went to Temple Emanuel.²⁰³ We went for Yom Kippur and once or twice during the year. But it was so different from anything in my background – at this point I didn't even know there was a Moroccan Jewish community in Montreal.

²⁰² Concordia University today; at that time Sir George Williams, a college started by the Y.M.C.A. for working people.

²⁰³ At that time and today, Montreal's sole Reform synagogue, established 1882. A split in the ranks of the congregation led to the creation of Temple Beth Sholom, which functioned for a number of years before rejoining what today is Temple Emanuel Beth Sholom.

I was interested in religion. I thought, let me try it. Mordecai Kaplan had come to McGill and gave a lecture [1964].²⁰⁴ I listened to him and was quite interested in his approach to Judaism. I spoke to him afterwards and I heard that there was a very small congregation, starting out. So I decided to find out where they were. Either Kaplan or someone there let me know. And that's how I started. I was still a student at the University of Montreal.

The synagogue community that Jean-Claude remembers was the warm, unpretentious and engaging place that Lavy Becker made it, with the help of people like Reuben Brasloff, Shulams Yelin and the others who contributed. The time spent socializing after services was also important, and remained a feature of life at the Reconstructionist synagogue. After a few years, though, the Moroccan community began organizing itself and Jean-Claude got involved; after this, it made more sense for him to begin attending the synagogues of this community and slowly he stopped attending the Reconstructionist Synagogue:

Shabbat we were 30, maybe 40 people and I enjoyed it very much. Of course I remember Stephen Barber, Jack and Kay Wolofsky. Many others whose names I don't remember. One thing that I loved was this feeling of being at home. The warmth; the people were simple, unpretentious. I didn't have to do anything to be accepted. They liked me and I liked them.

Lavy Becker used to give a sermon and then after there was discussion. We had some interesting ones. One day they asked me to prepare something about the Holocaust.²⁰⁵ I remember finding a book and reading some poetry. It was for me very moving and for the people around as well, though it wasn't a traditional Shabbos service. This was my way of connecting back.

As far as I was concerned, I had my friends that I would meet there; we had a small snack, a small *kiddush*, after the services. This was a good time, 15 or 20 minutes of socializing. Then after a few years I got involved with the Moroccan Jewish community, as it began to structure itself. In 1967 was the creation of l'Association sépharade francophone which in those days was an association of French-speaking Sephardim who banded together to create something. Then I started slowly but surely going to Moroccan synagogues and learning about the Moroccan community. This is how I slowly pulled out of the Reconstructionist [...] but whenever I go there, I'm always greeted very warmly and welcomed.

²⁰⁴ Kaplan wrote about this visit in his diary for Sunday March 22nd, 1964; the letter he wrote to Lavy Becker following the visit is in the National Archives (see below on page 231).

²⁰⁵ At the end of its first year, the synagogue Bulletin's "Year in Review" set out to acknowledge the efforts over the year of the "doers" who made the "do-it-yourself synagogue" possible. Among others cited was Jean-Claude Lasry for his "excellent chairing of a Panel Discussion on 'Youth and Activism' as well as his moving address on the 'Holocaust.'" Synagogue Bulletin, Vol. 1, No. 6.

The arrival of a large number of French-speaking, Sephardic Jews from North Africa in Montreal starting in the 1950s was a challenge to the established English-speaking Ashkenazi community. It took several decades of adjustment to reach agreement that linguistic and cultural pluralism was the new reality in Jewish Montreal. In answer to the question whether Jean-Claude minded the fact that the Reconstructionist synagogue community functioned almost exclusively in English, he replied that this had never been a problem. People were friendly, and made the effort to use whatever French they had in that context, even though out in the highly charged linguistic environment of Quebec in the late 60s and 70s they would want to be served in the stores in English. Jean-Claude also described how, if necessary, he would fight “tooth and nail” for his rights as a French-speaking Montrealer within the Jewish community.

When I was at the Reconstructionist Synagogue, people would try to talk to me in French. If the same people would go into a store, they would want to be served in English. In the synagogue though it was different: here is someone coming from Russia, from Morocco, if you know a few words, you use them. For me, there was never any problem. Language for me shouldn't be a barrier. It becomes one at times though, and sometimes a fighting tool, and I use it. If it's a question of my rights, I am going to fight tooth and nail.

I can give you an example. When I started involving myself in the Moroccan community, the organized Jewish community was aware that the Sephardic group was getting itself together and they tried to lure us into the existing Jewish community structure. Some of them were doing it purely out of friendship, others to have more “manpower.”

There were leadership programs going on at AJCS [at that time called the Federation of Jewish Community Services]²⁰⁶ This must have been 1967, I was still a young man and I wanted to learn about the community.

I remember a man, he became my friend afterwards, he gave a lecture in English during a leadership program. I asked him a question, in French. He said, ‘Why don't you talk to me in English?’ I said, ‘Well, if I had decided to go to Toronto, I would be speaking to you in English and I would have no reason to be speaking to you in French. But my parents decided to move to Montreal and French is one of the reasons we came here. We don't intend to let French go by the wayside, so

²⁰⁶ In 1916 a single agency, the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, was formed to oversee all fundraising for a range of immigrant aid, relief, educational and other community service groups. It later was renamed the Federation of Jewish Community Services (1951), then Allied Jewish Community Services (AJCS, 1965). In 1992 the name was changed to Federation CJA.

that's why I'm talking to you in French.' This is what I mean by fighting for my rights.

Finally, Jean-Claude commented on the progress that has been made within Montreal's Jewish community in terms of accepting the French language. That it took years for this to happen has to do with the complex political construction of language in Quebec, where the Jewish community from its inception had been allied with the English-speaking minority and many had absorbed their dismissive attitudes towards French.

At the community level, it is a different issue. I would have to say that the Jewish community of Montreal has come a long, long way from the attitudes it had in the 50s and 60s and 70s about French. French was despised as a language, as a culture. Ridiculed. It was linked to the Québécois people. In those days it wasn't *in* to speak French at all.

Today, it is 20 years after the Parti Québécois first came in. They had a tremendous impact. A lot of young people left, they didn't want to have anything to do with French. Those who stayed, most of them, decided to adapt. At AJCS, Manny Batshaw was one of the proponents; there was even a committee, with a woman from the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue, on bilingualism. They made efforts in the late 70s and early 80s, to give AJCS a French dimension. Manny Batshaw was wise enough to understand what would be best for the community, even though it would mean a change in attitude.²⁰⁷ And the change in attitude has come. Today, you will see Jewish people speaking English who will try to speak French and not resent it ... or at least, they are much more at ease.

IV.4 My Mother was Angry at God: Anna Barber and her Parents

Stephen and Erika Barber were founding members of the Reconstructionist Synagogue, and Stephen Barber, a cultured, erudite man with a deep background in Jewish community work, was the young synagogue's first President.²⁰⁸ When the Barbers first joined with the others in the founding group, their daughter Anna was two years old. Forty years later, I spoke with

²⁰⁷ Manny (Emanuel) Batshaw, see below on page 321.

²⁰⁸ The glimpse of Stephen Barber offered here is a personal one, seen through the eyes of his daughter Anna and complemented by Anna's account of her mother. In particular, this section takes its name from Erika Barber's response to the trauma of losing her first husband and infant son in the Holocaust and highlights the fact that Anna's mother found a way back to shul thanks to Lavy Becker. Stephen Barber's contributions to Canadian Jewish life are not documented here but a rich source for such documentation exists in the National Archives as the Stephen Barber Fonds: MG 31, H 113.

Anna about her parents and their involvement with the Reconstructionist Synagogue and about her own experience. Anna had made a practice of returning to Montreal and the Reconstructionist Synagogue for the High Holidays each year since her mother died in 1997, from Israel, where she had made her home. Anna Barber's father had died 14 years earlier and the synagogue was still a nurturing home for her to come to; it was the community she had grown up in and later made her own, where her parents lived on in the memory of the many who had known, respected and loved them.

In telling me how her parents came to be part of Lavy Becker's Reconstructionist experiment, Anna Barber explained that her mother had abandoned the traditional practice of her youth after surviving Theresienstadt herself but losing her family, including her first husband and infant son. Expressing emotions that were felt by many Jews after the Shoah, Anna told me that her mother said she had been "angry at God" – until the gifts of new love and new life brought new hope. Anna Barber was one of the youngest regular shul-goers in the first years, part of a small group of children who were the first to grow up in Montreal's Reconstructionist Synagogue. Anna commented that the shul had had a "positive effect" on her involvement in Jewish life, since she went on to pursue Hebrew and Jewish studies at the graduate level at Oxford and then went to live in Israel.

Yes, I've been a part of the synagogue since I was ... a baby! My parents came to Canada in 1950. They were from central Europe, Czechoslovakia; they lived in England before they came to Canada. My mother came from a more traditional home—what was known as "Status Quo." Her father had studied medicine at the university of Vienna. He was a doctor in a small town in western Slovakia.

My father came from Moravia, in central Czechoslovakia, from a family that would be called assimilated, in other words, they didn't have a kosher house, and there wasn't that much Jewish practice, but he had a bar mitzvah and he went to the synagogue on the holidays. Both of them were very involved Jewishly. My father was always active in the world Jewish community: the World Union of Jewish Students, World Jewish Congress, B'nai Brith, things like that [...] He went to Geneva on behalf of the World Union of Jewish Students and when the war broke out he was there, working with the World Jewish Congress. [...]He ended

up in England and there too he was involved in things Jewish. [...]Then he started a business but he played a role in Congress in a non-professional capacity. He was very involved with the Jewish world.

My mother was in Bratislava, Slovakia, training to be a lawyer when the war started. She had to leave the university before she wrote the bar exams. [...]She had been married shortly before the war broke out. Her husband and her child died during the war. She was liberated from Theresienstadt and went back to Prague and then worked for the World Jewish Congress in Prague, that's how she got to know my father, who had two sons from his first marriage. [...] Eventually she left Prague. The Communists had already taken over. Then she was in Paris for a while. Then she ended up in London too.

My parents ended up in Canada, in Montreal. They married in 1956, I was born in 1958. After the war, my mother had stopped keeping kosher completely. She would say that she was very angry with God after the war, after what had happened to her. She felt she didn't want to have anything more to do with religion. When I was born, when she had a child that she didn't expect to have, she felt that she could be on speaking terms with God again and that now that she had a family, the house should be kosher.

My parents were married in Temple Emanuel. I think Harry Stern, who was the rabbi then, had been a friend of theirs. But I don't think they were very happy at Temple Emanuel, either socially or religiously. In London my father had been interested in the synagogue of a rabbi named Louis Jacobs, modern Orthodox, a free thinking Orthodox rabbi—but my parents weren't Orthodox. I'm not sure at what stage my father heard about Mordecai Kaplan; I know that he and my mother got to know Lavy Becker in Montreal. The Reconstructionist ideology was much more in line with their ways of thinking. For my father especially, the idea of a civilization, an evolutionary civilization was very resonant and of course the emphasis on peoplehood, which was lacking in the Reform movement at that time.

Both Stephen and Erika Barber were from multi-cultural European backgrounds and spoke French. Coming in from the outside, their perspective on the collective identities in play in Quebec was an interesting one. Stephen Barber in particular believed that Quebec's Jews should learn French and he involved himself in dialogue with different groups and individuals. He would also have liked to include prayers in French at the Reconstructionist Synagogue. However, despite the presence of the French-speaking Lasry brothers and a few others, and despite Lavy Becker's positive attitude towards French and dialogue, the community on the whole was not interested.

Both my parents had learned French as children. My father studied at an extension of the Sorbonne in Prague and then he studied in Geneva. He liked the

French language. The 1960s was the time of the Quiet Revolution here in Quebec. He believed very strongly that the Jews should be learning French. He always said that there was nothing sacred about the English language. That there was no really good reason why the Jews should have allied themselves with the English-speaking community. He was involved with “Les amitiés culturelles Canada français—Israel”, in the 70s he was very involved with it.²⁰⁹ They did cultural activities, lectures in French of interest to Jews and French Canadians, they had connections with the Université de Montreal. The other group was called Cercle du roi David. Through Lavy perhaps. Lavy had quite a few clerical friends, Roman clergy. My father had some friends among the Sisters of Zion, French-speaking nuns; also at the Abbey at St-Benoît-du-Lac, he knew the Abbot there, who was involved in the Cercle, in Jewish-Catholic dialogue. They went as a group trip to Israel and stopped in Rome; there’s a picture of my father being presented to the Pope, Paul VI.

In 1967 there was a centennial prayer anthology that came out—Lavy was the Jewish representative on the editorial committee—in which there are French prayers.²¹⁰ My father really wanted to incorporate some of the French prayers into our synagogue. There was no response. At that time there were no French-speaking members except the Lasry brothers [...]. My father spoke French to them. Probably one or two others, that’s it. It must have been alienating for them.

Although Lavy Becker’s “Statement of Intention” (above on page 112) focuses on adults as the primary constituency for his Reconstructionist experiment, a few people, like the Barbers, had children. Anna has a series of pleasant memories from those early years, including sitting at little round kindergarten tables in the years before the community had a home of its own. Anna continued to be involved and active as she grew into a young woman. In 1976, when she was 18 years old, Ron Aigen arrived as the community’s first paid rabbi. The young rabbi and the Board decided to involve some younger members in the running of things and Anna answered the call.

My father was the first President (Manfred Saalheimer was president first, but he died suddenly). I used to go to shul every Saturday. We met in the Folk Shule, in the gym there.²¹¹ That’s one of my memories, with the gym bars behind on the wall. When there weren’t too many people we would meet in one of the classrooms. But it must have been a kindergarten classroom because they were

²⁰⁹ Amities Culturelles Canada Français-Israel, was founded in 1963 with Monsignor Irénée Lussier, rector of the University of Montreal, and Judge Harry Batshaw of the superior court in Montreal as co-chairmen. (see the entry on Canada in the *American Jewish Yearbook* 1964, p. 173 and also the Stephen Barber Fonds MG 31, H 113 in the National Archives of Canada).

²¹⁰ *Canadian Centennial Anthology of Prayer/Recueil de prières, du centenaire Canadien*, published by the Canadian Interfaith Conference, whose Chairman was Lavy Becker.

²¹¹ Folk Shule, Jewish People’s School.

little round tables that we sat around. As a child, it's difficult to know how many we were. I don't think it was a very big group. I know that we had some Seders in the Folk Shule and then for a while in the new building – towards the end they were quite big.

When we were in the Folk Shule we were opposite the Brown Derby – is it still there? There was a tradition ... Most of the members at that time did not keep Shabbat, they drove to shul. People used to go to lunch at the Brown Derby after services on Shabbat. Our house was kosher. But apart from Lavy and maybe a few other members I don't know how many had a kosher house. We had a kosher house but ate non-kosher out [...].

I was one of the kids. There weren't that many. There were Hillel Becker's children who were around my age. Jeremy is a year older and Debbie a few years older. When I was six the Winers moved to Montreal. Laura is a year and a half older. The Drazners joined, they had three daughters. We used to go out to the cloakroom in the Folk Shule and play.

Pleasant memories, definitely. The shul is definitely a very fond part of my childhood. There were not many occasions when I had to be forced to go. I went pretty much when my parents went. Every week, and all the holidays. On Yom Kippur we used to rent a room at the Capri Hotel on Decarie so that we wouldn't have to drive to shul on Yom Kippur. It was different. I liked the walk back and forth. I wasn't fasting yet, so it was easy.

It was a small group so you knew everyone. My bat mitzvah was a fairly big event in the shul I guess [...].

At one point, when I was 18, the Board decided they should have some younger members. So Chuckie Wertheimer, who was a year younger, and I—we were the first young people on the Board. I co-edited the Bulletin with Barbara Kay for a year or two and then on my own for one year. When I was in my last year at McGill I was on the executive. Went to the Board meetings, took the minutes.

Anna Barber's Jewish identification was strong, and grew stronger. She attended public school in the Protestant system, supplemented by some afternoon school Hebrew classes; she got increasingly involved as she went on to study first at McGill and then at Oxford. As Anna became increasingly involved with things Jewish, her practice changed, to a point where there was a bit of tension when she returned to her parents in Montreal.

I never rebelled, possibly I should have. I had gone to Montreal West High School, with afternoon school at Shaare Zion during elementary school for a few years. After that I got more and more involved. I did Jewish Studies at McGill. I was looking at either Jewish education, or becoming a rabbi. The shul had a positive effect!

Then I went to Oxford to do another degree, in Hebrew. My other field had been British history. At Oxford I came into contact with Orthodox Jews at the Jewish Society. At home we'd had a very few friends who were modern Orthodox.

Altogether I'd had very little contact up till then [so the Orthodox practice I encountered at Oxford] was a bit of a change and a shock. The non-egalitarian aspect was very hard for me to take. Other aspects I liked a lot. I became more observant. I decided to observe *kasbrut* outside the house, which I hadn't up to that point. At Oxford I decided not to ride on Shabbat, not to carry money on Shabbat, things like that. My rebellion was that I became a little more observant than my parents. They didn't like it that much. But I didn't pester them about it. Once I tried, but I saw it just wouldn't work.

The big change was that I decided to move to Israel. England is very different from Canada. I was exposed to what it was like to live in the Diaspora, to be part of a not terribly welcome minority. Also, there was very strong anti-Zionism there. We don't realize how pro-Zionist North America basically is. In England, the opposite is true. Especially in student circles.

Yes, this was very upsetting to me. Also I spent quite a lot of time in Israel while I was in England. My father would spend half the year in Israel. He was renting an apartment. It was cheaper to get a cheap flight to Israel during the breaks than to stay in England. We had three 8-week terms with six-week vacations in between and a long summer vacation. I was in Israel five times. I was studying the language, so I started to feel much more comfortable there. My father died at the end of my final year at Oxford. I spent a year then in Montreal with my mother looking after things, then I went to Israel.

Having made her home in Israel, Anna Barber returned to Montreal in 1996-7 for a period of seven months to be with her mother, who had fallen ill with cancer. During this period, Anna renewed her relationship with the Reconstructionist Synagogue, by then named *Dorshei Emet*, meeting it on her own terms as a grown woman and making new friends among the baby boom generation. When Erika Barber died, members of the community, starting with Rabbi Ron Aigen and his wife, were wonderfully supportive to Anna, who continued to make the trip from Israel to be with them for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

My mother died 3½ years ago, of cancer. She was ill for about 2 years. The last year I was traveling back and forth and then I was with her for five months before she died and then stayed 2 months after that.

During that time the shul became more and more my own community. I got to know different people from those my parents had known, newer members who were more my age. The shul was wonderful. Very much so. Some of them had also known my mother for a very long time and were very attached to her. Other people, especially Ron and Carmela—unbelievable! Ron was there at least twice a week to the hospital to visit my mother. Carmela would come once a week and bring food for me. I always went there Friday night. I also went to others. Many people. [...] I don't know what I would have done without that kind of support [...] People still mention my parents in shul, which is lovely.

In remembering her mother, Anna Barber spoke of how she had been involved in the early days, looking after the *kiddush* after services along with the other members of the Women's group, among other activities. But, Anna reflected, there was something more than the challenges of nurturing a new kind of experimental endeavour involved for Erika Barber. For the woman who had been very angry with God and who had found her way back to being "on speaking terms," being part of a warm and intimate synagogue community evoked memories of her childhood in a vanished world.

My mother used to talk a lot about her childhood, the small town she was from. In her eulogy Ron talked about it. So that although she was very involved in getting the new shul going, and the *kiddushim* and the Women's Committee and all that, especially in the early days—it also reminded her of her childhood. There was a connection to the past.

As Ron Aigen's eulogy put it:

But to really have known Erika Barber was to know Holic, a sleepy hamlet in Czechoslovakia to which her family returned when she was a young child. The story Erika told me most often was of the small synagogue with a wooden ark, painted blue with stars on the inside, so that when the doors were opened to take out the Torah, she imagined the Torah Scrolls with their shining silver crowns to be dazzling like the glow of heaven. Ever the consummate storyteller, Erika could bring to life those people who rose on tiptoe at the recital of Holy, Holy, Holy in imitation of the angels. Her telling of how the cantor, Abrahamsohn, dramatically prostrated himself before the Holy Ark on Yom Kippur made you feel the awe. Love and humour, sanctity and drama were conveyed in every word of her tales.

Erika embodied the old-world charm of Central European manners and culture. She had a wicked sense of humour and a fierce loyalty to both family traditions and universal justice. With her passing, we have lost not only a great humanitarian, but an entire world which she kept alive through her stories and which is no more.²¹²

IV.5 You Look in the Phone Book ...: Herb Winer

When Herbert Winer came to Montreal in 1964 from New Haven, Connecticut, he was already a Reconstructionist. Unique among Lavy Becker's founding group, he had been brought up in a Reconstructionist home. With a dry wit and sharp mind, "Herb" Winer, as he

²¹² A further sense of Erika Barber and her place in the Reconstructionist synagogue community is given in Rabbi Ron Aigen's article honouring her in the "Lives Lived" section of the Globe and Mail just after she died. Article titled "Erika Felicitas Adler Barber," April, 10, 1997 p. A20.

was known in the community, quickly became an important member of the core group and was the synagogue's second President. Sadly, the first death recorded in the synagogue register is that of Herb Winer's first wife, Harriet, who died just five years after the Winers arrived in Montreal with their young family.²¹³

Herb Winer spoke of how easy the choice of synagogue had been when he first arrived in Montreal, due to the involvement first of his mother and then of both his parents with Reconstructionism. For Winer, "synagogue" meant Reconstructionist synagogue: he knew what he was looking for, and he found it.

I came to the Reconstructionist synagogue for the simple reason that my parents were among the founders of the first Reconstructionist synagogue in the United States, the SAJ [Society for the Advancement of Judaism]. Believe it or not when [my mother] graduated from the Teachers' Institute of the Seminary in 1910 [...] she went to work as a secretary for Mordecai Kaplan. So, when I came to Montreal, in 1964, and there was a Reconstructionist synagogue here [...]. well, you know, [...] you need a barber, you look in the phone book [...] that was the situation.²¹⁴

Herbert Winer's parents were full of enterprise, pioneering each in his or her own way, his mother with advanced studies and his father as an entrepreneur having come to America to make his fortune, then bringing his parents over from Eastern Europe. Together, Herb Winer's parents created a Reconstructionist home for their five children.

My paternal grandparents I never knew [...]. My maternal grandparents on the other hand, were rigorously Orthodox. My grandmother baked *challahs* every Friday and did all the other things that were required and my grandfather would go around the Upper West Side of New York, selling, with a pack on his back, selling with a great bundle of boxes of cigars. He was a tobacco jobber when that was a classy trade. Neither of them of course had any so-called higher education.

My parents were both born in Europe. My father came to New York to make his fortune and he married only at 40, because it took him that long to get established

²¹³ Harriet Winer continues to be remembered in the synagogue community, especially at Hanukkah when a special *hanukkiyah* given by the family to the shul in her memory is lit.

²¹⁴ Herb Winer's mother was Hajnalka Langer (1890-1987). Mel Scult's notes to Kaplan's diary state that she was a "graduate of the TI [Teachers Institute], who [was] executive director at the Jewish Center. Later she was active in affairs at SAJ [Society for the Advancement of Judaism] and TI Alumni." See Mel Scult, ed. 2001, *Communings of the Spirit: the Journals of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. Vol. 1, 1913-1934 (Wayne State University Press, Detroit, and The Reconstructionist Press) 138, n. 11; see also page 142.

and to earn enough to bring his parents over from Lithuania. In the 1890s and the first decade of the 20th century the notion was that European Jews would do well to go to the land of the free [because they were being persecuted]. My grandparents were part of the great waves of immigration that came to Ellis Island ... and made the Statue of Liberty the national icon it is today.

My father was an auto-didact. Mother studied at Columbia and the Seminary. My father learned English and he had a very fine grasp of the language, but he saw an opportunity to work with Yiddish and the other languages that immigrants spoke. In the '10s and '20s of the last century, there were something like 25 newspapers published in New York City in languages other than English. There were three or four in Yiddish, also German and Spanish and so on. So my father assembled a group of people who could take the English advertising campaigns of Kellogg's Cornflakes, or Manischewitz and place them in the ethnic newspapers. These companies would advertise in the English papers, but of course in the teens and twenties the major place where you advertised matzoh was in the Yiddish press because Jews read Yiddish newspapers. ... He captured an opportunity at its peak.

Our home was a Reconstructionist home. Both my parents, from their different backgrounds, maintained it. It wasn't a question of my mother playing the role of a domestic beast of burden [...] nothing of the sort. My father was extremely proud of mother's accomplishments and knowledge and the things she did. But they also had five children. And that's a handful. Still, she continued her studies when we were children.

The rabbi officiating at Herbert Winer's bar mitzvah was Mordecai Kaplan, a larger-than-life figure, certainly in the eyes of a 13-year-old boy. Winer remembers both his own bar mitzvah and the controversy that was still alive at that time, stemming from when Kaplan had created a bat mitzvah ceremony for his daughter Judith 12 years earlier:

My parents were founding members of the SAJ and that's where I had my bar mitzvah. The rabbi was Mordecai Kaplan. As my memory fades about many things, I still can remember as a 13-year-old boy [Kaplan] standing over me [...] It's not true that he never made a joke, but it's also true that in his *Weltanschauung* there were too many serious problems for the Jewish people [...] to make jokes; so the thing to do is to get to work! He was not offensively serious, but he was seriously serious, in a very constructive way. You know that he had an enormous output of writing at the Seminary and elsewhere, and that his influence, though often unrecognized, is still profound. His daughter Judith was the first bat mitzvah in 1922. My bar mitzvah was only 12 years later, so this was still fresh and the source of great conflict in the New York Jewish community: 'For a woman! Next thing you know, pork will become kosher!' As time has passed, it's almost three quarters of a century now, Kaplan's views have been integrated very widely, much more widely than people are willing to – or need to – acknowledge. He had no great need for monuments. Kaplan was a very, very large character. You can easily stand in one place and not see beyond a few trees.

Kaplan's daughter Judith married Lavy Becker's friend Ira Eisenstein in 1934.²¹⁵ Eisenstein had graduated from the Seminary in 1931 and it was he who officiated at Herb Winer's wedding. The Eisensteins were good friends of Herb Winer's parents and became important people in the Winers' life. It was a relief, then, in coming to Montreal, to know that there was a Reconstructionist Synagogue.

Remembering the shul as he encountered it in its early days, Winer emphasized the then common perception that it was in every way "Lavy Becker's shul." In speaking of the reception of the Reconstructionist Synagogue among Montreal's religious establishment, Winer used the phrase that I have heard repeated often by shul members of all ages and generations, to the effect that in the early days, the synagogue was "regarded as *treif*," something Jews should stay away from (see the "We Were *Treif*" section below on page 239):

I was married during the war. Another powerful influence in my life [in addition to Kaplan] was the man who married me, and that was Rabbi Ira Eisenstein. He and his wife Judy were very dear friends of my parents. They used to come over; this is the kind of thing that sticks in your mind. They were both good amateur pianists. They would play four-hand transcriptions of Mozart symphonies. In the 1930s that was considered a good thing, quite an accomplishment for an amateur. ... The friendship with the Eisensteins was influential in my life. So when I came to Montreal and found that there was this Reconstructionist synagogue, I thought, 'There's one thing I don't have to worry about.'

The congregation was young. It was in every sense of the word, Lavy Becker's shul. He had already become a leading figure in the secular activities of the Montreal Jewish community. But he was regarded as *treif*, of course, by the religious establishment, the congregational establishment. Certainly, he was respected for his activities within the community but believe me, he was the object of much severe discrimination. It wouldn't happen today, I don't think. A lot of things wouldn't happen today. Conservative synagogues today would say 'Oh yes, sure, we have bat mitzvahs, we've always had them.' ... But I'm asking you to look back 70 years, 68 years if you want to be precise; or to look back to 1964, which is 37 years ago, and it really has changed a lot since then.

Herb Winer moved away from Montreal in 1979 but his association with the synagogue has remained. Memorable moments in recent years include his 80th birthday, marked in shul with a

²¹⁵ Mel Scult, *Judaism Faces the 20th Century*, 355; see also Ira Eisenstein's autobiography, *Reconstructing Judaism*.

fine celebration in 2001, and the festival of *Simchat Torah* in 2002, when he was honoured as *Hatan Torah*.

IV.6 It was frankly only because we knew that one day we'd need cemetery plots: Ethel Kesler

Ethel Kesler's journey from the world of her parents to Lavy's shul included rejecting the Orthodoxy of her childhood, in part by moving on to a wonderful marriage to "an atheist," followed by the joys of children, exuberant involvement with socialism and social causes, and professional accomplishments as a social worker and community organizer. Her statement to the effect that she and her husband joined the Reconstructionist Synagogue "really frankly only because we knew that one day we'd need cemetery plots," although somewhat misleading, is a simple statement of a widespread truth. Many people join synagogues and churches for reasons associated with the life cycle. Ethel Kesler's statement is somewhat misleading because what she found in Lavy Becker and his shul over time went far beyond the detachment her initial statement might suggest. In "Lavy's Shul," Ethel Kesler found that Judaism did not have to be a question of what one *must not* do or believe but rather that it could be a warm and inclusive multi-generational community built around important values, a beautiful heritage that she has made a point of sharing with her grandchildren.

Ethel Kesler told the story of her background and the path that led her to the Reconstructionist Synagogue looking back from the vantage point of late middle age. She remembered the love and fun of courtship and marriage as well as the painful passages of a childhood under the tutelage of brave and accomplished, but severe, parents. This is the story of a gutsy young woman, a "feminist before she knew there was such a thing", determined to get the higher learning she craved, despite her father's belief that girls didn't need much

education. It is also the story of a complex Jewish identification, which passed through a number of different stages through the years.

The story of Ethel Kesler's family is itself a wonderful Jewish Canadian memoir, telling of the path of a couple of Eastern European immigrants who ended up on a big farm outside Ottawa, having earned the gratitude and respect of all the other farmers, and also of the clergy, in the region. A reflective and a thinking woman, Ethel Kesler expressed herself with a clarity that needs little or no explanation. Her story is presented below substantially without comment since the full sense of a life path, the reasons why it led to Lavy Becker's door and what joining the community came to mean is present in Kesler's telling.

Background, Parents, Childhood

My parents represent a real love story. They met by accident. My father fell totally and completely in love with my mother and insisted they get married. My father came from a very well-to-do family; my father's side of the family were considered bourgeois. This is why a few years later my father felt they absolutely had to get out of Russia. Members of our family were being thrown out of university in order for the peasant children to be brought in. My mother's family were also not at all poor, they never lived in a ghetto, they never lived in the country. My father came from Novozibcov, a university town a couple of hundred miles south of Moscow. My mother came from Kiev.

[...] my grandfather apparently owned a grocery store. My mother, being the eldest daughter, worked very, very hard; she always talked regretfully about the fact that her father made her work so hard that she could not go to school. Both my parents wrote and read and spoke Russian and Yiddish, and then learned to speak, read and write English when they came here. [In addition to their languages], the other thing that my parents brought over with them from Russia was a very clear idea about how children should be brought up. Very strict ... but also highly ethical, responsible. I remember my father had a sign up in the house, I can see it in my mind's eye to this day, it read "Responsibility. Doing the Right Thing Without Being Told."

I was the eldest child of four daughters and this was a source of great disappointment to my father. He let it be known that he was very disappointed not to have had any boys. So I think I became conscious of gender at a very early age. I've been a feminist ever since I was a child without really knowing it. I just naturally gravitated towards things that were academic, which my parents did not approve of particularly. We were girls, we were not expected to get an education. I fought with my father every step of the way.

I came to Canada at the age of four. I don't remember learning to speak English, I don't remember learning how to read, I don't remember anyone telling me what a library was. But when I discovered the library: that was the beginning of my life.

My mother became Canadianized very quickly and was thrilled with the whole democratic way [...]. She loved living in Canada, she loved Canadian food. We didn't eat Russian food. Mother was into salads and things long before it became the thing to do [...] we had a wonderful kitchen garden.

But my mother was not a well person. She died aged 61 of a severe heart condition. She cooked and baked marvellously well, but with four children, it was a handful. My mother supported me when I graduated from high school and my father would not send me to university even though my closest friends were all going. He refused because he thought I didn't need that kind of education. He wanted to buy me a little dress shop. He thought that I would be a good business person, I should sell dresses. Of course over the years, we had developed the kind of relationship where if he said one thing I said the opposite. So instead of agreeing to the dress shop, I took myself off to a business school.

Did my parents lose members of their families during the war? I have no memory of any of that. My mother corresponded with her family. I can remember being ten or eleven and coming in and finding my mother sitting on the sofa and weeping because she had received a letter, that had pieces cut out of it. It was from a member of the family writing to tell her about all of the losses. She did try to communicate with the Red Cross, but she was never able to find out anything about her people who perished. Before that she used to send parcels. ...

Ottawa Valley Farmers

It's a very interesting story as to how we came to be a farming family, gentleman farmers. When my father came to Canada he went to Ottawa because he had family there. They gave him a little old beaten up truck and sent him out into the country to buy anything that he could buy. He began to buy cattle from farmers and eventually became what I suppose would be called a drover. This made him very well known in the Ottawa valley farming community, which was of course Irish, Scottish, and English. I don't think they had ever met a Jewish person before. And my dad was young and vigorous and vibrant, very handsome, a very pleasant appearance, people welcomed him easily; but he was also extremely honest and very ethical. When dad's funeral took place a couple of years ago, the farming community turned out in great throngs and everyone was telling stories about Harry Leikin, the first Jew they'd ever met. They couldn't believe it because the things they'd learned about Jewish people were just not at all nice.

He was loved in the farming community, and trusted. He would come in to buy a calf or a cow and if the people had problems they would discuss them with him, to get his opinion. He was like a traveling social worker. Many, many wonderful, wonderful stories. I never really appreciated that part about my father. He and I were always arguing about things. It was only in retrospect that I realized what a really fine and unusual man he was.

Anyway, one of the farmers in the Ottawa valley was going bankrupt and he called in Harry Leikin to discuss the financial problems. The farm had been in the family for generations, the land was ceded to them, early ... it came with a certificate of

originality. They said “Harry, the only person we can trust with the farm is you. Can you buy the farm, so then we’ll know whose hands it’s in. We know you’ll take care of it.” After the war had been on a year or so, we moved to the farm.

It was a dairy farm. None of us had ever lived in the country before. It was a huge acclimatization that had to take place. But we did become very much part of the farming community. My parents supported both the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church. My mother was a member of the women’s auxiliary at the churches. They went to embroidery bees, they played cards.

When I became engaged to be married, and I was the first girl in our family to do so, the churches all had quilting bees and made us beautiful, beautiful handmade quilts; and they made baby quilts for the twins when they were born. The Catholic priest was at my wedding, the Protestant minister was at my wedding. Two rabbis were at the wedding—it was a huge community affair.

The farm of course was run by a whole crew of men. They lived in their own quarters. We had a huge red garage that held cars and trucks. The men’s quarters were over the garage. They had their own cook because they were non-kosher. We lived in our farmhouse which was like a city house.

Religion

Both my parents were very observant Jews and religious practice happened first around the table. But also, my father was instrumental in starting a synagogue in Ottawa, it was a small Jewish community in those days. He and a couple of friends organized a synagogue in somebody’s home. That’s how it started. Now known as Agudath Israel congregation, it’s a huge, cathedral-like thing; my father’s picture hangs on the wall as the first president.

From my father’s Judaism ... we girls were excluded. My image of my father is of him being wrapped in his *tallis* [prayer shawl] and saying morning prayers as we were getting ready to go to school. Nobody ever told us what he was doing or why he was doing it, it was just what dad did. Because we were girls, we were excluded from all of that. The only duties we had were to be helpful to our mother in terms of preparing food, and I hated that! My sister, who loved cooking, became a dietician.

There were no Jewish schools in Ottawa when I grew up. I could not have had a Jewish or Hebrew education if I had wanted it. When I was in high school my father hired an elderly woman to teach me the Hebrew alphabet, so that I learned to read Hebrew. Once I had learned a few of the prayers he would sternly turn to me and instruct me to say the *bracha* [blessing] for bread for example. He also tried very hard to have me do the after meal prayers of thanks. Some of my worst memories are being forced to sit at the table long after everyone else had gone because I had to do the *bentching* [...]

My father spoke to God every day. We knew that. If he had a decision to make, we knew that to him God was really a presence, and that they were on the best of terms. I was never introduced to God. I didn’t know who he was, and I knew perfectly well he wouldn’t want to have anything to do with me because I was a girl. I always knew that my antecedents were stern people, Orthodox, conforming, and my parents were the same. I really rejected my parents’ religion, along with

everything else that they represented. The fact of the matter is that since I was a child, I never believed in the concept of God. And when I fell in love, it was with an atheist!

The thing that persisted for me was the Friday night tradition. From the time that my children were old enough to sit at the table, I had to do a Shabbat meal the way my mother used to do it. I just had to, it was part of an impulse, it was something I wanted to provide. I loved seeing my family around the table, and I always loved setting the table. The cooking and the baking was something I did learn to do but decorating the table was something I loved, in part because of my interest in flower arranging. So we always had very beautiful table settings for Friday night and Friday night was an important part of our lives: not in a religious way, it was a family night.

Education, Marriage, Politics

When I finished high school, I was so disappointed because all my friends went off to university and I couldn't go. I enrolled in a business school to learn how to type and take shorthand, and my mother gave me an allowance. I took a very quick course in shorthand and typing and got a job immediately with the government. I began to act as a secretary in one of the minister's offices. I did this for a year, depositing every check that I got and living off my allowance, the pocket money my mother gave me every week. I was driving the family car back and forth from the farm into town. And of course you never went into town without asking everybody if they had any messages to take in and you never left town to come back home without phoning to see if anyone needed anything. It was a very, very structured helping inter-relationship. Everybody had to help everybody else.

Eventually of course I did get to university. After the year that I spent saving my money, my father realized that there was nothing he could do to stop me, even though I was just a girl. So he did pay for my expenses at university. And when I graduated from Queen's I went on to the University of Toronto to study social work. He continued to support me. That was where I met Bill.

The fact that Bill was an atheist was a very important thing to me. Even before we married, Bill and I used to go to meetings at the United Jewish People's Order. We called it UJPO for short. It was socialist. We were not card-carrying communists but we were "pinko" and all our sympathies lay with the labour movement and the young communists' league. I had many friends who were communists and carried the card proudly. We became very active with the CCF, our political party of choice.²¹⁶ We had friends who went off to the Spanish Civil War. That was the milieu we lived in: God and religion were not a part of anything that we did, in fact I think I developed a kind of snobbish attitude towards people for whom religion was important, and who went to synagogue and who did all those sorts of things. I did nothing like that. I was a citizen of the world. That was the thing. Brotherhood for all.

²¹⁶ CCF: Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, political party founded in 1932 in Calgary, Alberta as a progressive, socialist, labour coalition.

There was a thriving socialist community in Montreal and we joined it when we came here. We joined the Montreal branch of UJPO. We talked a lot about brotherhood. We were very concerned with poverty. Then with the nuclear thing, we became very concerned about war. We met in people's homes. They were my earliest friends.

When we came to Montreal, I went straight to the mental hygiene institute one day a week, leaving two 4-month-old babies at home. I had somebody who came in one day a week to be helpful to me, and that's the day I went out. I became part of the family life education program.

The community I lived in was not the Jewish community—it was the social work community. I led family life education groups all over Montreal in all of the schools. Discussion groups for parents who were raising children. I think it was very helpful to the parents who participated. I have wonderful memories of wonderful people ... the seriousness with which we took all of our children's development.

And then, as the children were beginning to grow older, the nuclear age came along. I devoted myself totally to anti-nuclear activity. I started the baby tooth survey that we did in order to verify whether children's milk teeth contained traces of fallout from the bombs that were being tested. So, I was doing public speaking all over town. I went to Toronto, I was on television, I was very much an activist. Still, I was absolutely not concerned with the Jewish community, until I was asked to sit on a committee at the Y.

My husband had been a member of the Y family when he was growing up as a child in Montreal. Harvey Golden who was then head of the Y asked Bill to become involved, and Bill said only if I would be involved.

It was the Y that brought me into the Jewish community of Montreal. I loved it. They had a nursery school, they had daycare, they had activities for children. It just seemed like an important part of the community. ... And I fell in love with Harvey Golden, he was a marvellous person. As well, I was meeting very nice women of my own age and stage who were also bringing up children. I began moving up through the ranks at the Y. I eventually became vice-president.

Things Changed When We Began to Have Children

Things changed when we began to have children. My father was very anxious for us to give our children a Jewish education, so when our children came along, we did try, we enrolled them in the Talmud Torah school system. Not having grown up in Montreal, I knew nothing about the Jewish school system, and Bill of course knew nothing about Jewish education in Montreal. The Talmud Torah was the worst choice we could have made. The children were not happy; we took them out after the first year. We also had a private tutor for them; because our children did have bar mitzvahs, despite the fact that their father was not a practicing Jew.

I do think that a lot of the people who were socialists in their 20s and 30s, as they became more middle-aged, they began to gravitate to communities of one kind or another. My guess is that they joined congregations in other parts of the city, for the same reason we did. By the time we were in our 40s, we were buying homes, and becoming middle class, and began to realise that for the boys' bar mitzvahs

you had to be connected to a synagogue. The Shaare Zedek was just down the street, we lived on King Edward. The children had bar mitzvahs there.

So we joined the synagogue for our children, and had bar mitzvahs. I hated the services and I hated the programming at the synagogue but, if only for my parents' sake, the boys simply had to have a bar mitzvah.

It wasn't till after the boys were at university that I heard about the Reconstructionist congregation, through my friend Saretta Levitan. It was through her that we joined and it was really frankly only because we knew that one day we'd need cemetery plots. The building had been completed, on Cleve Road. ... We would never have gone to the Temple [Emanu-El], for some reason. It didn't feel right. The Levitans and other friends of ours belonged to the Reconstructionist Synagogue and so we went along with them.

I think I was in the process of changing. I began to see people coming to synagogue and sitting together and knowing what they were doing, and having some feeling about what they were doing, and I came to equate that with happy families. It began to have some meaning for me; because I found people were explaining things to me in this synagogue. There was meaning. It wasn't just mumbo jumbo. They weren't just doing things because "I say so!"

Lavy's Shul and Community

I had nobody to pray to. The concept of God was not something that ever felt real to me. The concept of community is what did it for me. It was community at the Y, it was community in family life education, it was always that cultural aspect that resonated for me.

Lavy I loved from the moment I met him. I just loved him. He was so sweet. He was affectionate with me! And he didn't even know me. He was a warm, human, person.

Well, at first it was extremely foreign to me; although there was a familiarity. The sound of people praying was a familiar sound to me; I'd heard my father praying like that, using the same kind of inflection, you know ...

[...] Yes, it must be close to 25 or 30 years that I've been associated with the Reconstructionist synagogue. ... I go more often since Bill died. I always went on high holidays. By the time I started being interested in the synagogue the children were off at university.

I was beginning to realise that there was a theoretical, philosophical explanation for a lot of the things that I was doing [...] A sense of responsibility for the community, for the carrying on of tradition [...] I was beginning to realise that I was very proud to be Jewish.

I had lots of experience with non-Jewish families through the family life education process. I used to say to people, "If I had not been born Jewish, I would have become Jewish, because it is so intelligent." I approached it all cerebrally. It just made sense to me. It kind of supported all of the wonderful warm, loving human things that we were doing anyway. It was just giving me reasons. I always loved the intellectualisation. ... that's what turned me on.

I came to this on my own. I was really not this kind of person in my 20s or 30s. It started, probably in my 40s. I think tragedy has had something to do with it. Bringing up children, losing friends. Having financial ups and financial setbacks – you certainly learn from your life experience.

I think my friends have had an enormous influence on my life. Especially my friend Saretta – for her, religion has always been very important. I knew her parents very well, and her parents knew my parents. They weren't intimate friends, but we grew up in the same community. Her parents were very loving. Saretta's affection for Judaism came from her parents: she loved them, she loved being Jewish. So for her, it was an act of love. She was my role model.[...] It was very easy for me to start admiring the things that she admired. She admired this synagogue, the religious leaders. We would talk about them. ...

Bill died in 1979 and the synagogue community was supportive. Ethel became more involved, participating on the social action committee and eventually as a Board member for three years, during which time she chaired the cemetery committee. All of this involvement was something she felt good about and made a point of sharing with her children and grandchildren. Ethel Kesler is a woman who has thought for herself from a very young age, who continues to think and to reflect. Lavy's shul was and is a good place for her:

For three years I chaired the cemetery committee at the shul. That's a hard job. I had to go to meetings in the community that were attended by other chairmen of other synagogue cemetery committees, about the upkeep of cemeteries. I had to deal with members of our own community who either wanted to buy a plot or wanted a refund on a plot—or they didn't want a member of their family buried where they were, or there was something wrong with the stone. You get to know a lot about people [...].

I've always demonstrated my belief in community and tried to share it with my children and grandchildren. My granddaughter Maya wants to go to university in Israel. My feeling is – it's like a little tendril, which suddenly sprouts.

[...] My antecedents were based on faith. Mine is through my head. [...] Mordecai Kaplan is one of my heroes. This intelligent approach to life has made my life richer. There's a logic ... that's right, it has enriched my life beyond words.

IV.7 Seeker from Crestwood Heights: Barbara Kay

Barbara Richmond Kay came to Montreal from Toronto in 1964. She had been brought up in the 1950s in the affluent neighbourhood of Forest Hill, today located in central Toronto but then a suburb and the subject of a pioneering interdisciplinary post-war Canadian study of

mental health and social adjustment entitled *Crestwood Heights: A Study of the Culture of Suburban Life*.²¹⁷ The value placed on a good education leading to a rewarding career, together with the means to support the necessary steps along this path, meant that this neighbourhood produced a high proportion of highly motivated and successful Canadians. At the same time, “Crestwood Heights” exemplified the showy and competitive consumerism that some of the post-war generation, and also the Reconstructionists, objected to, the kind that created synagogues with an “edifice complex.” True to the Crestwood Heights profile, Barbara Kay received a good education, earning a B.A. from the University of Toronto and then a Master’s degree in English Language and Literature from McGill. Also in line with one of the patterns noted in *Crestwood Heights*, Barbara Kay reversed the assimilatory slide begun in her parents’ generation by becoming involved with a young man who had left the Conservative practice of his parents to devote himself to Orthodox Jewish study.²¹⁸

Barbara Kay learned from and with her studious boyfriend for a number of years before meeting and marrying another young Jewish man, this one with a minimal Jewish background. In line with her generation, her background and her own intelligence and curiosity, there was a lot of “seeking” on the path that led Barbara Kay to the Reconstructionist Synagogue community. Having arrived at the community’s doorstep, she had no doubt about having found what she had been looking for. Barbara Kay took her place at once in the Reconstructionist Synagogue community, where her skills and enthusiasm were appreciated and put to work.

Barbara Kay describes her background as typically Conservative. Like Lavy Becker, Shulamis Yelin, and Reuben Brasloff, her forbears were Eastern European immigrants. However, being

²¹⁷ John R. Seeley, R. Alexander Sim, and Elizabeth W. Loosley, *Crestwood Heights: A Study of the Culture of Suburban Life* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1956).

²¹⁸ “The break [with Orthodoxy] has been made by the parents only to be healed again by the children.” *Crestwood Heights*, 212.

born during the Second World War, she belongs to a different generation. Rather than growing up downtown in the poverty and Orthodoxy, or anti-religious political fervour, of the inter-war generation, she belonged to the first generation of Jews to grow up in Canada's new suburbia.

I grew up in a typically Conservative family. My mother is an American, and her father had been a *mohel* and a cantor. My mother had an Orthodox background, Modern Orthodox, from Detroit. My father's family came from Poland; he was the youngest of nine children, some of whom were born in Poland, some in Toronto. His mother died when he was quite young. His father never Canadianized, never spoke English in fact. My father was fluent in Yiddish. He had had a very impoverished childhood, they were in the rag trade. You know the movie, *Lies my Father Told Me* – my father used to sit with his father, on the wagon, collecting rags and bottles. He didn't go to university but he did go into business very young; he was very high-powered, quite driven, as many of that generation were.

In the end, my father was extremely successful. We grew up in the famous "Crestwood Heights," a very privileged, affluent neighbourhood. I went to a wonderful school, a public school – where there were 99% Jewish kids. We were all children of the same kind of people, either first or second generation, very, very pressured. The kids were determined to succeed. Very strongly Jewish, but in a very modern sense. There was a range, from Reform to Orthodox. We were in the Liberal-Conservative tradition. Since my parents had such a solid background, they kind of blew their capital a little bit, instead of adding on to it. They relaxed into a less observant lifestyle, but remained very confident of their Jewishness. They were extremely Jewish in the sense that their humour, their friends, all their associations were Jewish – I think we lived off that capital a lot.

We had a solid Jewish education because although we went to public school, we also went to Hebrew school, and we were always affiliated with a synagogue. My mother used to go to synagogue quite a lot. Our synagogue was very new at that time. It was Conservative, with mixed seating, and it had a very high profile for a long time; it was very famous, very charismatic. And it was a huge synagogue, seating 3000 people. It was very conformist. This was the 1950s, the well-dressed people, the glitzy bar mitzvahs and the weddings, that whole thing. My parents loved it. When I was young, this was the way it was, for us and for everybody I knew ...

By the way, my younger sister was the first girl in Toronto to have a bat mitzvah. There was a certain cachet to that. My father was very active in the Jewish community. He was a philanthropist, head of the Combined Jewish Appeal one year, involved in fundraising, all that stuff. He became quite well known; later he was a Negev Dinner honouree and so was my sister actually, just a few years ago.

Barbara Kay was driven in different ways from her sister or father: her quest was for information, knowledge, and understanding. She intensified her seeking in Jewish life by falling

in love with a newly Orthodox Jewish boy, whose attention she attracted through the intelligent ruse of requesting that he teach her Hebrew:

I think I was seeking something. At the age of fifteen, I met a boy who I fell madly in love with, and I think that part of the attraction was that he was Orthodox. His family like ours was fairly Conservative, but he was a seeker, and had become quite Orthodox, out of conviction ... He was a brilliant scholar, very quietly charismatic in my eyes, and he had a great sense of humour. So I said to him – it was a ploy, I wanted to get to know him – I asked if he would give me Hebrew lessons. Wasn't that clever? Within a few weeks, forget about the Hebrew lessons, he was my boyfriend. We went together for years, and within a few months I was firmly converted to Orthodoxy. I wouldn't turn on the lights, I wouldn't drive, I drove my family crazy. The house was kosher, but it started not to be kosher enough for me. In the mid-fifties, at that time, there was a lot of religious seeking [...]. Some of my friends went the other way, they were into Buddhism, and so on ... this happened with a lot of the people who were Reform Jews. But I went the other way, I was interested in the scholarship, and the tradition. I stopped going to our shul and I started going to his shul, which was almost equally large but older, a very beautiful older synagogue

We would walk every *Shabbat*, it was quite a long way, then maybe come to their house for lunch. We would stand outside and talk for hours and hours. He set me a program of reading. I guess it lasted three or four years and it was very intense. I read so much about Orthodox Judaism, and Judaism in general. What I had learned in after-school Hebrew school was quite superficial. Sometimes in the afternoon I would walk back to the synagogue with him, because the rabbi was in love with him, thought he was going to be a rabbi – and he thought he might too. So we'd go to his house and I'd just sit there and listen to the two of them. This rabbi was very scholarly, very erudite, well known: Rabbi Walter Wurzberger, an American, very respected in the North American Orthodox community. Of course I did not dare to participate in these conversations, ... but I think I did pick things up by osmosis. These were Talmudic conversations, it was very, very focused and on a level that was quite high Looking back, I think that really I was very privileged to sit in on all this.

As it turned out, Barbara Kay did not remain Orthodox in her practice, although her time of studying and learning gave her a lasting appreciation for the Orthodox way of life. After graduating with a B.A. from the University of Toronto, she moved to Montreal to continue her studies because the man she married was from Montreal. They did not join a synagogue immediately, but attended her husband's father's Orthodox synagogue for the High Holidays. When they had children, it was Barbara who took the initiative to find a synagogue she could feel comfortable in, since her husband went to synagogue only rarely and didn't much mind

“which synagogue he didn’t go to” When friends invited them to a bar mitzvah at the Reconstructionist Synagogue, Barbara Kay had no doubt that this was where she belonged, where she wanted to be. Having thought a lot, and sought a lot, she was in the right position to appreciate what Lavy Becker was offering. She found the philosophy exciting and the traditional look and feel comforting, reminiscent of her youth.

Then my [Orthodox] boyfriend went off to university; he considered the rabbinate but in the end decided to study philosophy. He stopped being Orthodox, though he remained quite traditional. Those years were extremely important to me, they helped me feel very confident in my Judaism. Even after I stopped being Orthodox, I felt that I knew more than the average person. I felt quite well rounded. I could see why one wouldn’t want to be Orthodox, and I could see why one would want to be. I knew so many of the arguments for ... So I felt like an educated Jew. But my husband is the opposite ... [he has a fascinating background but] very minimal Jewish education [...]. All his friends were Jewish and he wanted to marry somebody Jewish, but he didn’t know about keeping kosher, keeping a Jewish home; I tried to start keeping kosher but we ended up not doing it ...

We didn’t join a synagogue in Montreal because during the High Holidays we would go to his father’s Orthodox shul. His father, when he did go to shul, went to an extremely Orthodox one.... the women all wore *sheitels*, the whole thing.²¹⁹ So I would be sitting there thinking, this is ridiculous, we’re not going to continue doing *this*. But until we had children it wasn’t really a big deal because I wasn’t going to shul altogether.

Then we had our first child and I said, now we have to start thinking about a shul. By the time my son was four years old, I said okay now we *really* have to do something, it’s time! Fortunately, we were invited to a bar mitzvah at the Reconstructionist shul. ... My son was born in 1968, this would have been 1972 ... I was certainly not among the founders, but it was still early. Lavy was still in his prime, and it was still quite a small congregation.

We went to the service. I was so impressed. We loved the service. We loved Lavy. I forget what he spoke about. He may have spoken about Reconstructionism. I was absolutely fascinated. I said, “But this is what I am!” I could never be Reform because that doesn’t appeal to me at all. I read Hebrew quite well, I understand enough of it to read the liturgical stuff. I would not want to go to where it was all in English, without *talleisim*.²²⁰ I loved that traditional atmosphere, and yet, here not only were men and women sitting together – that I could have in a Conservative shul – but there was the philosophy, the whole philosophy of it. Of course by then, I was ... not an atheist ... it’s just that to me the [theological issues are] almost irrelevant ... to me, the religion is very sociological. And here,

²¹⁹ *Sheitel*: A wig worn by Orthodox Jewish women in order to cover their hair.

²²⁰ *Talleisim*: plural of *tallis*, prayer shawl.

there was a philosophy ... this was putting into words of a philosophy I didn't even know I held.

I had dropped the Orthodoxy, but I hadn't defined myself, to say "this is what I believe or don't believe." But here, I said, "I totally identify with everything he's saying." I took one of the little booklets that you could take home.

I loved the atmosphere, it was so warm. Of course it was all Lavy. He created the whole atmosphere. And I loved the shul, it was so cute! So I said, "This is it dear, this is going to be our synagogue." My husband, said okay, he left it to me – let's put it this way: he didn't care which shul he wasn't going to go to! I was the one who was going to be going, and I was the one to look after the religious upbringing of the kids. ... He finds shul very confining and very boring, partly because he doesn't read Hebrew very well, whereas for me, I've been going to shul all my life. I can see myself with my parents in shul, even with my grandfather sitting on his knee in his old *Peilische* shul in downtown Toronto, him giving me candy during the sermons, you have all the dimension of memory. So that, for me, is much more what religion is, and my husband didn't have any of that. So I totally understand why he's not interested.

Energetic, enthusiastic and articulate, Barbara Kay offered a clear and succinct evaluation of the synagogue community as she found it, in its early years. This includes a nuanced appreciation of the positioning of Reconstructionists, "in between" a strong commitment to Jewish life and a need to be modern and honest with themselves. It also includes a lovely appreciation of the very special intimacy that Lavy Becker created in his shul and of the unique combination of warmth and intellect that prevailed and that was, in her words, "An assault on the heart and the brain at the same time."

I said "This is our shul!" and we quickly joined. At that time Herb Winer was President. What a wonderful man. He was more than smart. I just fell in love with that guy. First, it was Lavy I fell in love with – they were very different. Herb with his dry wit, very reserved and then Lavy, with his giving, loving, generous, nature between the two of them, I was just quite bedazzled. And I loved that it wasn't ordinary sermons, it was inter-action. First of all, everybody participated in the service. It was responsive, everybody was davening. What I liked was that it was the kind of aggressive davening where everybody was praying, everybody was really into it, the way you would find in a really Orthodox shul; but the decorum was almost like a Reform shul, everybody started and stopped at the same time. Everybody was very genteel looking. The atmosphere was refined, extremely fine, and yet at the same time, there was a sense of people bringing a lot of *kavannah*, a lot of meaning, to their davening. It was very paradoxical. I grasped immediately from what Lavy was saying and from reading the little booklet, that here was a synagogue that people would say was "atheistic," or that wasn't concerned with God or didn't believe in a transcendent God or that sort of thing – but I wouldn't put it like that. And I said, "Isn't this interesting!"

My assessment was, these were people who have a lot of inner religious feeling but intellectually can't accept being part of an institution that demands certain beliefs from them. At the same time, there's a lot of pent-up feeling, they want to be religious but they don't want to be believers. An anomalous kind of situation to be in, and yet this institution had picked up that strand of North American ... in-between-ness, of people that feel very modern, and very much part of the [Jewish] community and all that but are sort of cynical about the superstitiousness, and yet want to be connected in a very traditional kind of way. They don't want to be Unitarians, they don't want to be dry ... They want to distil the spiritual feeling you get from being a participant and very involved, but they want intellectually to be able to talk at a level that is quite detached. So, the people that were involved in the shul were first and foremost thinking people. They weren't joining because it was across the road, or because they liked the Hebrew school because there was no Hebrew school. They weren't joining because they could have a beautiful, big affair there because it wasn't big and beautiful. They were joining exactly because it said what it said, and so when you get people that are joining a place because they truly believe in it ... it's like a political party: you have a lot of like-minded people. I certainly was, am, a person who lives by ideas, that's a huge part of my life. I love to think, and talk, and try to understand and to have an ideology of some kind, a guiding ideology. And yet, I want to be Jewish.

So I did join, and because when I join something I'm an enthusiast, I'm never passive, it didn't take long, I think within weeks ... Herb Winer sized me up pretty quickly and invited me to be on the program committee ... it may be that he was not the President yet but that he was head of Programming, or that he was President and Head of Programming. Everything was so small then. I remember going to a meeting at his house and before I knew it I was the head of Programming. First it was Programming, then it was the Bulletin, then I was the Vice President for a while, on the Executive.

Over the years, many times, I've asked myself, Why did I have that instant connection? And why did I walk out of there saying, This is my synagogue, I mean, this is it! I have to say, a lot of it was Lavy. I loved the way he interacted with the bar mitzvah boys and the family, the intimacy, a very strange intimacy that just enveloped the room, and that was Lavy. There's no question that was Lavy. So it was a combination of being drawn in, seduced, by a very charismatic personality, but the message that he was delivering was one that was right to hear. So it was sort of an assault on the heart and the brain at the same time. It was beautiful.

* * *

The people profiled above were individuals whose deliberate choice of Montreal's Reconstructionist Synagogue meant that they arrived in the community with heart and commitment. These qualities were essential to the community-building process, as were the

different talents that members brought with them. The next part of this portrait enters into the life of the community these people and the others who were with them created together.

Chapter Five

V “An Assault on the Heart and the Brain at the Same Time”: Life in the Do-It-Yourself Community

There was a wholeness about the community that Lavy Becker and those who joined him created together, to use Kaplan’s term, an “organic” quality. In many ways, this was the kind of thing that those involved in a “quest for community” were searching for. In line with Kaplan’s insistence that Jewish community needed to be about more than prayer alone, fun and humour were part of community life, as were seriousness and grappling with the topics of the hour, relating to both Jewish and general social and political concerns.

The bonds of organic Jewish community were woven and strengthened over time. As well as engaging in communal thought and discussion, people celebrated and mourned intense moments of the human life cycle together and marked the seasonal round of festivals and holy days. This was the deep structure given by millennial Jewish tradition, providing continuity in “a place where the Torah is read.” At the same time, the sense of doing something new and important was strong, as was the accompanying sense of agency: as Jack Wolofsky said, “We were changing Judaism!”

“Lavy’s Shul” might be seen as the meeting at a moment in time of the life paths sketched in the previous chapters and of a range of other analogously rich personal narratives, the other people who joined the congregation. All of these people brought their pasts with them and so constituted a gathering of “collected memories,” to use James Young’s term. Individual voices remained strong and personal, and members of the core group each contributed something to shul life, depending on their skills, their backgrounds and interests. However, due in large part to the loving, organizing leadership of Lavy Becker, Montreal’s Reconstructionist Synagogue was more than a collection of individuals, it was also a collectivity that developed its own story,

a sense of itself partially rendered in the sometime epithet the “thinking person’s shul” but most enduringly captured in its self-chosen nickname, the “do-it-yourself community.”

This chapter explores life in the shul community in some detail, focusing in turn on three aspects that contributed to making it distinctive: its character as a lively hybrid; the “culture of conversation” it developed and its reception in the larger community. A number of specific points are contained under these headings, including the role of the synagogue building in expressing community identity, the place of women and gender roles, the contributions of Mordecai Kaplan and the Eisensteins to community life and a glimpse of the flow of narrative in action at the 1967 Hanukkah party.

V.1 A Lively Hybridity

Barbara Kay’s characterization of the Reconstructionist Synagogue community as “an assault on the heart and the brain at the same time” brings together elements sometimes considered contradictory. There were other ways in which “Lavy’s Shul” straddled different kinds of boundaries: institutional, generational and cultural. Institutionally, the Reconstructionist Synagogue was a hybrid, a creative synthesis characterized both by the informality of *havurah* and by the solidity of synagogue. In fact, Lavy Becker spoke both the “language of synagogue,” from earliest childhood, and the “language of *havurah*,” having started one of the first study groups to focus on Kaplan’s *Judaism as a Civilization* soon after its publication in 1934 (see p. 92).

Culturally, the shul community was poised between “uptown” and “downtown,” with both identities alive and present. The class lines that had been drawn between bosses and workers, Westmount Jews and downtowners in the days of Lavy Becker’s youth were no longer sharp and the origins of the shul population were mixed. By the time the founding group at Lavy’s

Shul got together, the downtowners among them had “made it” and most had moved out of the old neighbourhoods. Located in the affluent suburb of Hampstead, the synagogue was physically distant from the small immigrant synagogues of the downtown core and yet, for people like Reuben Brasloff, this was their “latter-day shteibl.” The informality and “do-it-yourself” spirit of the shul community recalled the self-help ethic that prevailed among poor immigrants, an ethic that was very much alive in the community.

Generationally, “Lavy’s Shul” both anticipated and shared something of the spirit of the sixties. Its self-chosen nickname, “do-it-yourself,” connected with the baby boomers’ anti-consumer ethos expressed notably in Stuart Brand’s *Whole Earth Catalog*, first published in 1968. The *Whole Earth Catalog* promoted demystification, self-reliance and empowerment and its subtitle “access to tools,” clearly expressed a do-it-yourself ethic.²²¹ In addition to their sense of being very much in tune with the times, however, people at the Reconstructionist Synagogue also carried memories and behaviours that reached back to Montreal’s downtown and the immigrant experience for some and to other kinds of dislocation for others. The result was a community in which maturity and long memory lived together with youthful enthusiasm and a spirit of experiment and innovation.

The most concrete expression of the institutional, generational and cultural hybridity that characterized the synagogue community, and of its complex and unique identity more generally, was the building that was its first home. This is the subject of the first of the two sections below. The second section explores the theme of women and gender, an area in which the traditional co-existed with the avant-garde.

²²¹See Wikipedia. 22 July 2006 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Do_it_yourself. The *Whole Earth Catalog* was immensely popular and other hands-on catalogues of different kinds followed its lead, including the series of *Jewish Catalogs* compiled by Michael Strassfeld.

V.1.1 Beautiful, Yet Simple: The Building

... there were some in our congregation who resisted the very idea of a building. They preferred rented quarters so that we would remain small and retain the intimacy we had achieved. Their point of view was seriously considered. It was offset, however, by a decision to build modestly in order to remain small and intimate. Our beautiful, yet simple *shul* is proof that this can be done, and at low cost.²²²

The people who came together in answer to Lavy Becker's invitation to constitute a "Reconstructionist Group" were attached to Jewish life but looking for something different, for different reasons, as the biographical sketches in Chapter 4 have illustrated. Among the founding group and early members there were some who were not interested in constructing a building, fearing that this would become too much of a focus and would compromise the group's core values. However, in this as in other areas, Lavy Becker's point of view was shared by a majority among his community and as well, he was persuasive. Nonetheless, the building managed to express both the solidity of synagogue and the informality of *havurah*, a kind of hybrid form. Beyond this, the building itself, including the do-it-yourself process used in its construction and the values and aesthetics the structure expressed, would become an important component of the community's identity. As will be illustrated below, these values included self-reliance, creativity, independent thinking, informality and an anchoring in Jewish tradition. From another perspective, the siting of the building in the anglophone Protestant bastion of Hampstead, together with what Lavy Becker and others insisted on calling the "Quebec look" of its design, offer a fascinating snapshot of the shifting tapestry of collective identities that forms the backdrop to this thesis.

* * *

²²² "Beginnings, Memories, Bar Mitzvah" 11. I have not seen any documentation about the cost of the building in the synagogue archives. In the Dedication Day (2002) booklet, architect Harold Ship writes "I believe that the entire budget for the building, land and furnishing was under \$150,000 with the building budgeted at \$100,000" p. 9.

There is an intriguing discrepancy in the descriptions of the synagogue building given by architect Harold Ship and the ones Lavy Becker and others articulated. In “Beginnings, Memories, Bar Mitzvah” and again in the Dedication Day booklet, Ship has been consistently clear about his sources of inspiration and the process by which his original idea was modified to arrive at the final building design:

At first I conceived the design as being a small building surrounded by a stonewall so that it formed a large courtyard in front and behind. All that you would see from the street would be the roof of the building, much like the traditional Polish wooden synagogues of the Middle Ages. Unfortunately, the zoning bylaws of the City of Hampstead forbade structures on the lot lines, thus eliminating the courtyard.

We moved the stonewalls back till they became the walls of the building. We could not afford a solid stonewall and had to settle for a plastered block wall with an occasional stone inserted.²²³

As consistently as architect Ship has spoken and written about the Polish synagogue being his inspiration, Lavy Becker just as consistently spoke and wrote about his desire to give the synagogue a “Quebec look.” The stone walls and roof that are reminiscent of Poland for Ship become typical of Habitant architecture for Becker:

I had no preconceived notions about the building. When I talked with Harold Ship, I said to him, wouldn't it be nice if it could have a Quebec look. Now, what's a Quebec look? Well, most of the Habitant homes were made with stone and mortar. That's why the bottom of the synagogue [reproduces this] in a simulated form, but you will notice that there are real stones, with odd shapes, filled in with mortar. We also have a mansard roof, a sloping roof, with shingles, to give it a Québec look.²²⁴

Lavy Becker's stylistic desires were expressed as early as 1963, when he wrote to the town of Hampstead declaring his wish to construct a building there that would have “architecturally the appearance of a largish house” using “either a French provincial or colonial form of

²²³ Dedication Day booklet, 9.

²²⁴ Beitel/Lazar interview, 1996. The Quebec character was also written about in “Beginnings, Memories, Bar Mitzvah” and cited in Canadian Jewish Chronicle feature by Steve Goldberg, “New Reconstructionist Synagogue to open mid-September” July, 1966.

architecture.”²²⁵ If Lavy Becker’s intent in building in the English Protestant enclave of Hampstead was to “teach a lesson” to this suburb that had excluded Jews, what if anything was he trying to teach by aiming for a “Quebec look”? It seems clear that despite the “lesson” to Hampstead, Becker wanted his synagogue to be a good neighbour and to blend in architecturally, not to be too obtrusive. The idea of aiming for a “largish house” makes sense in this context, but why not an “English-style” house, to blend in with British-emulating Hampstead, whose name, street layout and street names, like Fleet and Finchley, were copied from the London district?

It may be reasonable to suppose that in 1963, Lavy Becker was expressing openness to the Quebec reality, following the launch of Jean Lesage’s “Maîtres Chez Nous” slogan in the 1962 election campaign – and perhaps even that he wanted to suggest that anglophone Hampstead do the same. The consistency and positive tone with which the “Quebec look” idea was repeated and architect Ship’s Polish synagogue idea ignored, may suggest that the associations with Poland were still painful for some, or alternatively that the look back to the old country was not in line with the modern experiment underway at the Reconstructionist Synagogue. The popularity of the “Quebec look” idea may also suggest that members of Lavy’s shul community were proud of their empathetic awareness of the Quebec identity that was beginning to come into its own. One may perhaps speculate further that to be masters in one’s own house was a desire that a minority group like the Jews could understand very well on an emotional level.

A sense of the special quality of the moment in time when the first shul building was being planned and built, and of how it was to change, may be garnered from a “flash forward” to

²²⁵ Initially, Becker thought he might be able to buy an existing house as a first synagogue home. When this did not work out, he decided to build. In 1964, a plot of land was purchased on the north side of Cleve road between the “garage building and the projected Curling Club” (Dedication Day 2002 Booklet, 18-19 and Synagogue Archives).

2002, to the new building constructed on the site of the (by then) old building and dedicated on December 8 of that year. Quebec's first separatist government had been elected the year Lavy Becker handed over leadership of his shul community to Rabbi Ron Aigen. Collective identities had continued to polarize in the wake of that election, and the referenda of 1980 and 1995 had heightened the distinction between "us" and "them." By the year 2000, the nationalist Quebecois "nous" was quite clearly understood by the anglophones of Quebec, and if anything more so by the Jews among them, not to include them. The idea of building a *synagogue* in a style that would emulate Habitant architecture would never have occurred to anyone in the shul community in the year 2000. It would have appeared absurd. The building that was in fact completed in 2002 was lovingly conceived with historical references to synagogue architecture and especially to the Temple in Jerusalem. By this time, far from being an Anglo-Protestant bastion, Hampstead had become the most densely populated Jewish district in Canada.²²⁶

* * *

The initial decision to locate the synagogue in Hampstead was Lavy Becker's alone. He was then able to persuade others of the value of this choice, as he said, "I convinced others, I'm happy to say, that there ought to be a synagogue in Hampstead."²²⁷ The Synagogue's "Bar Mitzvah" commemorative booklet shows that Becker's reasoning had indeed been accepted by the community:

These efforts to establish the right to purchase land and erect a synagogue in that particular town were indeed noteworthy because hardly more than a decade

²²⁶ Once Hampstead changed its policies, the situation began to be transformed. According to 2004 statistics reported in the *Canadian Jewish News*, Hampstead was the most densely populated Jewish suburb in Canada "Cote St. Luc and Hampstead have the highest Jewish population densities of any municipality or district in Canada, at 69.8 and 74.5 percent, respectively." *Canadian Jewish News* May 6, 2004. Janice Arnold "Population Loss Worries Jewish Officials". <http://www.cjnews.com/viewarticle.asp?id=3289&ts=1> See also Canadian Jewish Congress Archives (ZD Hampstead) for correspondence on the original fight to have Jewish children admitted to the schools in Hampstead.

²²⁷ Lazar/Beitel interview 1996.

earlier, Hampstead did not even accept Jewish children in its schools as of right. It was our determination to establish publicly the right of all peoples and all faiths to equality under the law.”²²⁸

As the community’s “Honorary,” that is, unpaid rabbi, Lavy Becker was able to exercise his imagination, to act on ideas and to make things happen for “his” shul in ways that would be difficult for more traditional rabbis who would need to answer more closely to their Boards of Directors. Because he could reach into his own pockets, or his son Hillel could do the same, Becker felt free to use his contacts and creativity, including his contacts through the family business with which he was involved, to get things done – something he evidently enjoyed. But then, as Becker himself suggests, all this really worked because the ideas that he put forward were “acceptable” to the congregation. Glimpses of Lavy Becker in action emerge from his solutions to what to do about acquiring a *ner tamid*, an eternal flame to burn in front of the *aron kodesh* or ark, and to how to replace the wooden cupboard that had stored their Torahs in the past:

There were things that we did, simply because we talked about [them] For instance, the *ner tamid*, is an important part of any synagogue. Most of the members of our congregation are interested in art, in one form or another. What kind of *ner tamid* would we have? I didn't know, Harold didn't know. I'm not sure we knew any artists in Montreal to whom we could go. I went to New York to the Jewish Museum, which belongs to the JTS [Jewish Theological Seminary], and it had as its major director an Israeli, who is creative and I told him what we needed, gave him some measurements because I was involved in the building and I knew the height. It had to come down from the ceiling to a place above the *aron kodesh* and therefore you have those long metal pieces that hold up the *ner tamid*. Before the synagogue was ready for it, Expo had a little synagogue in the Jewish building. I lent them the new *ner tamid* for the time of Expo.

It's also a question of how much do you pay? What permission do I have from the congregation to spend money? Well in this case it was simple. Hillel said he would pay for it, and that was that.

For close to a year I sat on a chair right next to the *aron kodesh*, a box that had been built by one of our members ... he is no longer alive but his family is still part of our congregation, Heather Drasner's father [Lazarus Tinkoff]. I tried to evolve an idea. The box-like structure that every *aron kodesh* has doesn't take up

²²⁸ “Beginnings, Memories, Bar Mitzvah” 10.

much room, but it still wasn't attractive.²²⁹ Eventually it came to me. [...] The Torah talks about the tent of meeting, that the curtains were hung, etc. it suddenly dawned on me ... that kind of shape. At that time I suppose I had a good deal more influence on the congregation than I have now. I may have had a good deal more influence than Ron [Aigen] has now. Maybe the ideas that I projected were acceptable. The fact that I was involved with my family business that had men who could do this kind of thing was another matter. I myself, with my car, went across the river to a place I had found out about, to buy the Plexiglas of sufficient thickness, that was see-through; and I brought one of the workmen in, and we took measurements and we haven't had any repairs in all these years. It evolved from our needs. We go into the tent of meeting. That's why opening those doors and going in to pick up a *sefer Torah* is more meaningful to me, and I hope to others, than almost any other *aron kodesh* that I've seen anywhere, where you slide doors, or you pull curtains and you just reach in. In ours, we have to step in.

Lavy Becker offers a lovely inside glimpse here, of how meaningful it was to him to recall the ancestral “tent of meeting” every time he stepped into the ark whose design he had innovated. Equally telling is the image of Becker driving over the bridge in search of suitable Plexiglas and then taking measurements with a workman gives a lovely sense of the hands-on, do-it-yourself spirit of the community and of Lavy as a practical man of action. Other people too gave what they had to offer towards completion of the building – in addition to architect Harold Ship, engineers Sydney Becker and David Krashinsky donated their time and talents, as would others as needs arose. The do-it-yourself spirit was driven by necessity, since the small community was full of talent, but not wealthy. At the same time, “do-it-yourself” was a positive value. People contributed their expertise and time both because there was a need and because they believed in being self-reliant, not in being passive consumers. Mordecai Kaplan’s passion for thinking for oneself was shared by Lavy Becker and extended to doing for themselves in this shul community of “thinking people,” most of whom were doctors, lawyers, academics or other professionals, many of them beginning their careers.²³⁰

²²⁹ Another account says the box blocked the stained glass windows: “For the first years after the building was erected in 1966, we used the small *aron kodesh* lovingly fashioned in 1961 by Lazarus Tinkoff. However, placed in its natural spot, it unfortunately blocked the colors of the central window and made difficult the recognition of our series of tall stained-glass windows as a menorah.” “Beginnings, Memories, Bar Mitzvah”, 11.

²³⁰ The generation of early members included Lavy Becker, born in 1905, Manfred Saalheimer, born 1906 and Stephen Barber, born 1911. These people were in their late 40s to mid 50s when the Reconstructionist Group was

Lavy Becker's comment, cited above, that "Most of the members of our congregation are interested in art, in one form or another" points to the value placed on aesthetics in the community. This value would most probably have come naturally to the kind of cultured individuals Lavy Becker had attracted to his shul. However, valuing aesthetics and individual or cultural creativity was more than a question of personal taste within Reconstructionism. Mordecai Kaplan was powerfully clear in his writings on this subject, and gave aesthetics and creativity a pivotal role in the process of renewing Jewish life.²³¹ These elements are an important thread running through *Judaism as a Civilization*, where Kaplan argued that the "tendency to regard esthetic experience and creativity as essential to the life of the spirit" was one of the three principles that distinguished "modernism from medievalism."²³² Modern Jews needed to encourage creativity in their children and their communities because modern estheticism had the power to "engage the entire personality and genius of the most gifted men and women, and [...] elicit from them creative works that delight and thrill the rest of mankind."²³³ If the Jewish civilization was to survive, it had to participate in this kind of engagement and delight, continuing and expanding on the forms of creativity that had been present from the beginning:

A civilization cannot endure on a high plane without the preservation and cultivation of its arts. The art creations become part of the social heritage which is the driving force of the civilization, and come to be the means of calling forth from the group the civilization's characteristic emotional reactions. Jewish civilization has conformed to this principle. [...] The Bible is replete with evidence which points to the mature development that music and the dance had achieved in the earliest days of the Hebrew Commonwealth.²³⁴

first formed and in their mid 50s to early 60s when the first synagogue home was built. Others were younger, the generation of Jack Wolofsky, born in the 1930s or the 1940s, and so fit Harold Ship's description: "We were all young, in our twenties and early thirties, with our children approaching bar mitzvah, and little money to spare." Dedication Day booklet, p. 9

²³¹ Kaplan's approach contrasts with that of the Reform movement, where aesthetics and decorum were from the beginning seen as positive *cultural* values. It would seem that Kaplan's valuing of creativity had something like a *theological* intensity.

²³² *Judaism as a Civilization*, 37.

²³³ *Ibid.* 42.

²³⁴ *Ibid.* 203

In commissioning a *ner tamid* from an Israeli at the Jewish Museum in New York, then, or in creatively dealing with the issue of updating the synagogue's *aaron kodesh*, Lavy Becker was doing more than solving a series of problems: he was participating in the reconstruction and renewal of Jewish life.

The whole of the building project was animated by a sense of excitement and delight in working creatively with Jewish tradition, but perhaps no element in this project would prove a greater success in the eyes of the community than the stained glass windows that were a gift from Lavy Becker to the congregation. In the 36-year commemorative booklet, shul member and past president Fran Croll remembers discovering “that our beautiful coloured glass windows were originally clear glass” and that “Rabbi Becker found a European trained glass designer living in Pointe Claire, who [...] chose elements in the Bible which he interpreted in free form [...] These magnificent windows were a personal gift to us by Lavy.”²³⁵

²³⁵ There are a number of unanswered questions concerning these windows. In an effort to find and speak to their maker, I spoke eventually to Hillel Becker's wife, Mitzi Becker, who gave me the name Mesterom and provided the information that he was a Dutchman who also had created a door for them in their apartment, although the commission hadn't been entirely problem-free. Mitzi Becker didn't hold out much hope that I would find Mesterom however, as she said he'd been "not a young man" back then in 1967. An Internet search for Mesterom found it to be a venerable name in glass making in Holland. I also found reference to a Catholic church in Orleans, Ontario, with windows by Gerald Mesterom.

I called the church and the woman who answered the phone said, “Certainly, Mr. Mesterom is alive and living here in Orleans.” She offered to pass along my phone number to him and he called the next day, his voice gently booming and vigorous. “I've done them all,” he said, and listed many of the major churches and synagogues in the city here. Reinforcing the notion that other Montreal synagogues had avoided “Lavy's Shul”, Mesterom continued, “Oh, the synagogue in Hampstead? ... I couldn't even mention its name at the Shaar Hashomayim or other synagogues back then!” He remembered Stephen Barber with warmth. When I told him that his windows were the one element that provided a lovely continuity between old and new buildings, his response was: “They should have told me! I could have created an exciting new window to add to the new building!” Mesterom had promised to contact me when next he was coming to Montreal but from that moment on, he disappeared. I left additional messages but received no reply. When next I called, the line had been disconnected.

The Lavy Becker Fonds in the National Archives in Ottawa, MG 31H81 Vol. 4 contain a receipt signed by Gerald Mesterom for windows, dated April 19th 1967, with his added note: “With further reference to our conversation regarding the changing of colour (which represents a cross) you can see a cross in any type of design ...” Mesterom then indicated that he would charge the congregation for extra work done in removing the (imagined?) cross symbolism. It is interesting to note that Shulamis Yelin had complained to me on several occasions that the Christian stained glass maker had inserted his own Christian symbolism into the windows – her complaint at that time was about a “bleeding heart” – I suspect it may have been her complaints to Lavy Becker that triggered the “cross-shape” complaint.

“Beginnings, Memories, Bar Mitzvah” tells the story this way commenting, as Fran Croll had also done, on the way the sun would come in through the windows during services and with special effect in the late afternoon services on Yom Kippur:

Probably the most distinguishing and decorative feature of our synagogue is the stained-glass windows forming a background for the corner-placed *bimah* and symbolizing a seven-branched candelabra as mentioned in the Bible. (A stylized replica of this design is used as the logo on the congregation’s letterhead.) This effect was created by extending the corner window from floor to ceiling to form the stem and limiting other large windows to three on each side.

Since those windows as a unit formed the symbol of a menorah, it was not necessary to put any symbolism into the stained glass. The artist was able to concentrate on form and color to give us the warmth of light and sun-reflected colors.

However, the seven branches did give us six spaces in between; and by placing two small windows in each space, we were able to symbolize, also in stained glass, the 12 tribes of ancient Israel as they are characterized in the Bible.

During daylight hours, as the sun moves from horizon to horizon, the stained-glass windows impart a fascinating atmosphere. It is a particularly stirring experience on Yom Kippur to observe the rainbow-like spectrum of colors when the sun shines through the windows during the morning and reflects on the adjacent walls. Then, in late afternoon, the rays of the setting sun filtering through the window on the mezzanine and back wall enhance the mood of the congregation particularly during *ne’ilah*.²³⁶

Many people seemed to feel particularly attached to these menorah-windows, simple, tall, narrow rectangles filled with abstract-patterned stained glass and to the smaller rectangles with symbolic references to the 12 tribes. Perhaps it was that the windows combined a friendly simplicity with the innovation of a menorah shape and the openness of abstraction, and that friendly simplicity, innovation and openness were all characteristics of the community itself. Another factor may have been that the positioning of the windows behind the ark and *bimah* ensured that everyone who came to services spent a couple of hours looking at them and so they became very familiar. Whatever the reasons, the windows were the one decorative element, in addition to the ritually traditional *ner tamid*, that was retained some 35 years later

²³⁶ “Beginnings, Memories, Bar Mitzvah”, 23.

when the shul building was completely demolished and an entirely new synagogue constructed for the congregation on the same site.²³⁷

In addition to the menorah positioned at the synagogue's southeast corner, "Beginnings, Memories, Bar Mitzvah" details additional creative ways found to mark the Jewish identity of the building reaching back, as with the menorah, to the Bible and its descriptions of the Temple in Jerusalem:

To add some Jewish symbolism to the outside of the building without detracting from its Quebec character, we concentrated on the area of the door. Pastel-coloured stained glass with free-flowing menorahs was one touch. Another stemmed from the Bible's description of the garb of the High Priest.

On top of his tunic, the High Priest wore an apron with shoulder straps. On each shoulder strap he was ordered to attach an onyx stone, long and narrow, with the names of six of Jacob's sons engraved on each stone. Such are the stones encased in our doors, the 12 names having been etched by the stone-cutter following Lavy Becker's script.

The structure that the Reconstructionist Synagogue community produced was a success and served the community well for some thirty years, although it rather quickly became, in the words of "Beginnings, Memories, Bar Mitzvah", "snug," and an extension was added in 1976 (see Chapter 7). The rectangle of the sanctuary was bordered on its northern edge by a strip that included offices and a small kitchen. Above these was a mezzanine gallery that served both as a library and an overflow seating area. This balcony area recalls traditional synagogue architecture, where balconies were women's territory, used to separate the females from the

²³⁷ During the Dedication Day ceremonies on December 8, 2002, MNA for NDG Russell Copeman recalled the "old shul" and the many occasions on which he sat in the congregation with his wife and their sometimes unruly kids. He recalled fondly as well peaceful moments there, in particular towards the end of the day during Yom Kippur services, when the light would come in multi-coloured through the stained glass windows and fall upon the rabbi's wife Carmela Aigen. By popular demand and agreement, Copeman continued, those stained glass windows were the only element conserved and brought from the old shul into the new building. These windows were commissioned, said Copeman, by the synagogue's beloved founding rabbi, Lavy Becker, who died just a year too soon to attend this Dedication Day. "And how does one dedicate a sanctuary?" Russell Copeman asked. "We have a lovely Dedication Book, which we have all signed in one way or another. Although Lavy could not be here to sign the book in person, as I sat here this morning, watching the sunlight come in through Lavy's windows, our windows, I felt as though it was his hand that had come in to touch us all, to be with us, to sign this day in his own inimitable way."

males, who would have been downstairs with the prayer leader and the Torah. Being able to sit with their families, upstairs or downstairs, was a freedom community members enjoyed and commented on.

In the main sanctuary area, where the budget had not allowed for permanent seating, folding chairs provided flexibility as a contemporary article in the *Canadian Jewish Chronicle* explained:

One large room serves for all functions and by the clever manipulation of screens and chairs it becomes a sanctuary, a meeting room, a hall for weddings, bar mitzvah and congregational parties celebrating holidays and festivals.²³⁸

Often, the congregation would pitch in to fold and stack the chairs along the walls whenever services were to be followed by a celebration – and the celebrations were many and lively over the decades that followed. The first time that the new building was used is remembered fondly in “Beginnings, Memories, Bar Mitzvah” by Barbara and Charles Wainrib, who also offer a succinct overview of their journey to and happy arrival at Lavy’s shul:

April 30, 1966 was the day that our Cleve Road synagogue was used for worship for the first time. It was also the date that our daughter, Jeannine was called to the Torah as a bat mitzvah. We had moved to Montreal from New York in 1956, and between that time and 1963 when Mitzi and Hillel Becker invited us to join them for Kol Nidre services at the Reconstructionist Congregation, we had joined no less than five synagogues, seeking a spiritual home where all members of the family could feel comfortable. Obviously, none of the previous synagogues provided what we sought, and we will always remember that Kol Nidre in the Jewish People’s School, as well as the many Shabbat and Yom Tov services that we subsequently attended there with our children, before the Cleve Road building was completed.

On that Shabbat morning, that beautiful April 30, the building was far from complete. There really was no kitchen and we had to provide a stove and fridge for the caterer. But we were all elated, surrounded not only by our own families, but by our Reconstructionist family. At the end of her Haftarah, when Jeannine completed her *brachot* and raised her eyes to make contact with mine, it really didn’t matter whether or not the building was finished or if there was a fridge or not. What mattered at that beautiful moment was that we had finally come home, to a place of worship where our daughter could be treated equally with our son, and where every member of our little family could feel spiritually connected in his

²³⁸ “New Reconstructionist Synagogue to open mid-September” July, 1966.

or her own fashion, and where, as Lavy Becker used to say, “Everyone does his own 100%”.²³⁹

Anchored in Jewish history and tradition, incorporating the creativity that was an important Reconstructionist value, eschewing bigness in favour of simplicity, informality and do-it-yourself, the building that the people who were part of “Lavy’s Shul” constructed for themselves was an elegant expression of their values. Lavy Becker’s guiding hand and deep pockets were critical to the way the project took shape and to its success – as were the volunteer contributions of talented members, including the building’s architect and engineers. Hillel Becker commented on the nature of the congregation as his father understood it and the fact that his father was pleased at the difference his shul building expressed:

Look, Lavy wanted it to be an adult-oriented synagogue, and when the building was put up, there was no thought given to facilities for a school, for children, because Lavy thought that Reconstructionism was an intellectually demanding approach and he didn’t think it was something that would necessarily attract families with children.²⁴⁰ So that made it different and of course that added to the effect of the architecture, to some extent. Also, he didn’t want us to develop any kind of an “edifice complex.” It was simple, and modest. It didn’t have any of the trappings, architecturally, of a “normal synagogue.” So visually it started off differently. It had a lot of charm, I think we all grew to love it, but to outsiders, it was different. And frankly, I think that Lavy was not unhappy with the idea that it was different because I think maybe architecturally it was making the statement that we’re not a synagogue like all other synagogues, in this respect and in other respects as well.²⁴¹

In its acknowledgement of the French Canadian reality, its siting in Hampstead, its informal, open plan and its creative response to synagogue features such as the ark and the *ner tamid*, the synagogue building was a clear expression of the complex and unique identity of Montreal’s Reconstructionist Synagogue community and a reflection of a particular moment within the shifting landscape of the politics and demographics of Jewish identity in Montreal and Quebec. The form that the building created might be understood as a hybrid, in which disparate

²³⁹ “Beginnings, Memories, Bar Mitzvah”, 16.

²⁴⁰ “Beginnings, Memories, Bar Mitzvah” also states, and the statement was often repeated by Lavy Becker and by community members, that the synagogue building did not include space for a school because Montreal’s Jewish community offered a wealth of schooling options and community members were expected to take advantage of these for their children.

²⁴¹ Hillel Becker, interview by author, 22 February 2004; 12 May 2004.

elements were brought together by design and with intention, resulting in something lively and unusual. The theme of women and gender in Lavy's Shul may be seen also to express a kind of hybridity, between old and new, between the traditional practice many had grown up with and the philosophy of complete equality Mordecai Kaplan promoted. A focus on this theme yields a rich and intriguing glimpse of an important dimension of Reconstructionist community.

V.1.2 Women and Gender

Attitudes and practices with respect to women and gender roles in the Reconstructionist shul community between 1960 and 1976 expressed the varied backgrounds and temperaments present among the members and also reflected in broad outline Mordecai Kaplan's views on gender equality in Judaism. Everyone in the congregation knew that Kaplan's daughter Judith was credited with having had the first *bat mitzvah* and all were proud that their shul had *bat mitzvahs* for girls. In the early years of "Lavy's Shul" this was still unusual in Montreal, where traditional attitudes to such things echoed the dismay noted by Herb Winer among New York Jews some decades earlier: "Next thing you know, pork will become kosher!" On the other hand, the active and important Women's Group conducted itself in line with more traditional gender roles, inviting women to contribute in ways "particularly suited to their talents":²⁴² preparing and serving the *kiddush* or after-services snack, welcoming new members, fundraising and other crucial contributions that their sisters in Temple and Synagogue Sisterhoods and Ladies Auxiliaries throughout North America had pioneered starting in the 19th century.²⁴³

In terms of strict equality, then, the overall picture was contradictory and uneven but one thing was clear: the women in the community felt in no way oppressed. Women's liberation was in

²⁴² From the initial letter inviting women to participate, dated September 26, 1968.

²⁴³ See Donna Goodman, "Montreal Synagogue Sisterhoods (1900-1949): A female community, culture, and religious world." M.A. diss., Concordia University, 2004. See also "Sisterhoods" in *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, Paula E. Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore eds. (New York: Routledge, 1997).

the air during these years and, like other women across North America, the women in “Lavy’s Shul” felt liberated, engaged and on an equal footing with the men. For the majority of women whose backgrounds were traditional, being able to sit beside their husbands and male children was *the* change that removed the “second-class citizen” stigma they had felt in the balconies of their youths. Literally and metaphorically, there was no *mehitzah* (dividing partition) separating men from women and the boundaries that existed were fluid and permeable. Men were not kept out of the kitchen and women were visible, vocal participants, very much part of the “culture of conversation” that developed in the community (see Part 2 of this chapter). If there were ritual functions that women did not perform, it was not because they would not have been allowed to but rather because they were not interested or chose not to. In fact, it was the crusading spirit of two of the men in the group that was responsible for insisting women be given the honour of ascending to the Torah, initially against the wishes of some of them.

To a significant extent, attitudes towards ritual equality in the community were defined generationally. Most women from the shul’s founding generation were comfortable leaving the performance of Jewish ritual to the men. For one thing, they had not been given the necessary training to be able to lead the prayers or read from the Torah and as well, this would have simply “felt wrong”; as Saretta Levitan commented, “putting on a *tallis* was something my grandfather did!”²⁴⁴ However, these women felt differently about what the next generation, their daughters, could or should be doing. For people like Barbara and Charles Wainrib, it was a core value that Lavy’s Shul offered “a place of worship where our daughter could be treated equally with our son,” where equal treatment meant being able to read from the Torah on the occasion of her bat mitzvah (see above on p. 189) The complete functional equality that young women of the next generation would assume to be their right was recognized in the program

²⁴⁴ Saretta Levitan, Interview by author, 13 September 2000.

of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. The perspective of the founding generation on this new reality is expressed in comments made in the Synagogue Bulletin following the visit of second year RRC student Ilene Schneider, described in the Bulletin as “a child of her time.” The fact that the comments focus as much on the young woman’s clothing and hair colour as on the quality of her presentation would no doubt have displeased second wave feminists. Nonetheless, it is surprise and delight at the new generation and its innovations that predominate in the description of Schneider as a “vivacious, pink and white, mini-skirted redhead” who spoke on “The Woman as Rabbi.”

As the foregoing paragraphs suggest, the gender dimension in Lavy’s shul was complex. To begin with, this section will illustrate something of this complexity by considering Mordecai Kaplan’s views alongside the use made of them in the congregation. The rest of the section is devoted to an account of the Women’s Group, its accomplishments and contribution to shul life.

V.1.2.1 Crusading Spirits, Contrary Women

Few aspects of Jewish thought and life illustrate so strikingly the need of reconstructing Jewish law as the traditional status of the Jewish woman. In Jewish tradition, her status is unquestionably that of inferiority to the man. If the Jewish woman is to contribute her share to the regeneration of Jewish life, and if in turn Jewish life is to bring out the powers for good that are in her, this status must be changed. She must attain in Jewish law and practice a position of religious, civic and judicial equality with the man, and this attainment must come about through her own efforts and initiative. Whatever liberal-minded men may do in her behalf is bound to remain but a futile and meaningless gesture.²⁴⁵

The foregoing citation is part of an 11-page chapter from *The Future of the American Jew*, in which Kaplan argues his position on women in Judaism (Chapter 20: “The Status of Woman

²⁴⁵ Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1981) 402.

in Jewish Law”).²⁴⁶ The chapter is an impressive, refreshing and succinct illustration of Kaplan’s polemical style and straight talk, and of his interconnected sets of priorities and concerns. His underlying message is that a flourishing Jewish civilization will offer Jews a wealth of opportunities to live full and meaningful lives and that the living of these lives will in turn feed and enrich Jewish civilization and allow it to evolve creatively. Here he argues that Jewish women need and deserve to be offered all the opportunities for fulfillment that men have; equally, Jewish civilization cannot thrive or even survive if deprived of the contributions of its women. Throughout the chapter, Kaplan demonstrates a keen alertness to the issues affecting the status of women in Jewish law at different historical eras and in contemporary Israel starting in 1921.

As he does elsewhere, Kaplan develops his argument in this chapter polemically, by demonstrating that the other denominations within Judaism are incapable of supplying satisfactory answers. The Reform solution, to do away with law altogether, he compares to the “very successful operation” that leaves the patient dead! Going the Orthodox route, on the other hand, would condemn women, among other things, to completely unacceptable conditions surrounding marriage and divorce. The attempts of the Conservatives to remedy these conditions within the limits of traditional law have “so far [...] met with nothing but abuse from the Orthodox rabbinate.”²⁴⁷ The only hope in this critical situation lies with coming to understand Judaism as a civilization, which must necessarily find expression in law and be able to exercise juridical authority and adjudicate. “Henceforth, however,” Kaplan

²⁴⁶ Mel Scult notes that among the lectures Kaplan gave was an adult education series at the Society for the Advancement of Judaism in 1929-30 entitled “The Five Ages of the Jewish Woman – A Historical Survey of the Cultural Development of Jewish Women.” (*Judaism Faces the 20th Century*, 259).

²⁴⁷ *Future of the American Jew*, 411. Kaplan refers specifically here to the *agunah*, the term used to refer to a woman who wishes to be divorced from her husband but cannot because he has been unable to or has chosen not to grant her a divorce according to Jewish law. Jewish feminists have continued to lead the battle in Canada and registered a notable success with the introduction of a national amendment to the Divorce Act [21.1].

writes, “social justice, rather than immutable precedent, must govern the civic life of Jewry and underlie whatever juridical institutions Judaism can manage to maintain in the Diaspora.”²⁴⁸

Mordecai Kaplan’s views on women in Judaism were based on his historical and political analysis of the issues and his convictions about the need to renew the processes of Jewish law. However, changing the philosophy and theology of Jewish law did not necessarily interest the shul community, who were neither students nor for the most part strict adherents of the law. It seems clear that Kaplan’s detailed analysis was unknown to them. On the other hand, his general call to action in implementing gender equality in Judaism had certainly been heard. An engaging anecdote told by Jack Wolofsky on a number of occasions illustrates the way that all of this played out among the real people who were present and active in Montreal’s Reconstructionist synagogue community.

The story refers to the time when Jack Wolofsky and his friend Herb Horwich were acting as *parnassim* (ushers), giving out *aliyot*, the honours traditionally awarded to men, of ascending to the podium to participate in the Torah reading. In their ideologically-motivated though legally somewhat misguided attempts to give these honours to women, the men met with strong resistance from the women themselves, who had all the freedom they wanted or needed and did not want to do something that felt quite wrong to them. Armed with more conviction than information, Wolofsky decided to take on two formidable opponents, the wife of Honorary Rabbi Lavy Becker and the wife of shul President Stephen Barber, in order to convince them—a battle in which Jack found an ally in Stephen Barber and from which Lavy Becker quickly abstained.

When I first joined, women did not have an *aliyah*. They could open the ark, but they were not going to the Torah. When I became *parnass*, I don’t remember if it was ‘68 or ‘69, I was with Herb Horwich. I said, “Why can’t women have an

²⁴⁸ *The Future of the American Jew*, 411.

aliyah? Is there anything in Torah – I’ve read Torah, I’ve read it for a few years, gone through it – is there anything that says women are not allowed to read?” He said, “I don’t know, let’s try to get it through.”

One of the people who was most vociferous was Augusta, Lavy’s wife Augusta – who I loved! She was gutsy ... she would argue ... she called him ‘Lave.’ And ‘Lave’ didn’t want to get into a discussion ... he said, “Settle it!” Was she for it? No, no! She was against it.²⁴⁹

Herb Horwich then reported a commonly held misconception, to the effect that women could not approach the Torah because they might be menstruating, hence ritually ineligible. Although many people believed this, Jewish law actually specifies that the Torah is not susceptible to any of the categories of ritual contamination humans are subject to, including contact with dead bodies, men who have had a seminal emission or women who are menstruating.²⁵⁰ Wolofsky was correct in his first understanding that there was no legal barrier to women ascending to the Torah. Nonetheless, the brave men persisted. Augusta Becker sensibly set out the conditions as she saw them, and a deal was struck:

Herb Horwich said, “Well the whole idea is that a woman may have her period, so she’s unclean, that’s why she shouldn’t have an *aliyah*, ...” So I went up to Augusta and I said, “Augusta, would it be all right if I asked all the women, before I give them an *aliyah*, ‘Are you in the middle of your menstrual cycle?’” She said “No! No, you can’t do that!” I said, “Augusta, I have to know, because that way, you wouldn’t be against me giving them an *aliyah*. “

Then I said to Stephen Barber, “Are you against giving women an aliyah?” He said “No.” I said, “Okay, you handle your wife” ... she was also against it. I kept after Augusta. Finally, she said, “If women want to take on the responsibilities of men, then let them wear a *kippah* and a *tallit*.” I put out my hand, and I said, “Sold!”

Achieving a handshake with Augusta Becker was a step but it was not enough to convince Jack Wolofsky’s wife Kay, at least not to begin with. Nonetheless, the feeling of crossing

²⁴⁹ This and the subsequent interview excerpts in this section are from Jack Wolofsky, interview by author 1 July 2005.

²⁵⁰ It is important to dispel this myth, as it prevents women who would like to read or receive an *aliyah* from doing so. Two sources: First from the *Shulhan Arukh*, Orach Hayyim 84 : 1. “All persons who are impure read the Torah and recite the Shema, and pray [in the synagogue].” Cited in Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law* (New York: Schocken Books, 1984) 168. Second source is a baraita in the Talmudic tractate Zera’im, Berachot 22a that states: “It has been taught, Rabbi Judah ben Bathyra used to say: The words of the Torah are not susceptible to Tumah [commonly translated ‘impurity’]. Cited at World Union of Jewish Students website. July 31, 2006.

http://www.wujs.org.il/activist/programmes/programmes/simchat_torah/appendix12.shtml

boundaries for a good cause, of contributing to the positive evolution of Jewish civilization, was exciting.

So, we started. I have to tell you, I wanted to give my wife the first *aliyah*. I said, "But you have to put on a *tallit* and a *kippah*." She said, "No. I am not putting on a *tallit* and a *kippah*." I said, "You can't have an *aliyah*!"

Yes, those were stirring times! This was the whole thing ... We felt, giving girls bat mitzvahs as well ... We were changing Judaism! The evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people! [Jack Wolofsky added here an expression of his dissatisfaction with the evolution of synagogue life past the 1976 watershed: "That's why I feel very frustrated now. I feel it's become just prayer." ... see Chapter 7 below)

Whatever differences of opinion may have marked the introduction of *aliyot* for women in "Lavy's Shul," these appear to have been sorted out over the following years. By the time the synagogue published its "Beginnings, Memories, Bar Mitzvah" in 1975, the community's pride in this practice had become general:

Because we believe that women are entitled to the same opportunities for self-expression in Judaism as men, we include them in a *minyan* [quorum] and give them regular *aliyot*, in addition to the honour of opening and closing the *aaron kodesh*.²⁵¹

The foregoing story captures a moment in the changing life and times at "Lavy's Shul" where women were concerned and a sense of some of the personalities involved but it does not convey how important the egalitarianism of the community was to many families and many women in particular. For Beatrice Brasloff, Shulamis Yelin, Ethel Kesler, Kay Wolofsky and many others, this was a critical factor. Long time shul member Rhoda Angel was not alone in having chosen the community for its egalitarianism and then continuing to attend what her husband called, "My wife's synagogue." Her story, crisply told in a no-frills, no-nonsense style, speaks for many and also includes the detail that her husband was so pleased that she was happy there, that he made substantial contributions to the building fund even though he attended only rarely himself.

²⁵¹ "Beginnings, Memories, Bar Mitzvah", 24.

Mother and I used to go synagogue at Shomrim La Boker.²⁵² The ladies sit upstairs and the gentlemen sit downstairs. And at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, they'd put up chairs in the hall and they'd sell seats. If you weren't a member, you could buy a seat. So my husband would buy a seat. The three of us would go but we couldn't sit together.

So then I heard about something at the J.P.P.S. that it was a different way of looking at things, and that women were egalitarian, and that appealed to me.²⁵³ I said to my husband, "I'm going there." He said, "Go wherever you want! You know that I never told you what to do." I felt that we had two daughters, and I didn't want them to be like 'second-class citizens' – you know what I mean.

For Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, my husband came [to the Reconstructionist shul]. They phoned him for money, for the building. I got the bill – he'd made his pledge. I looked at him, I said, "You pledged *this*? What are you doing this for?" He said, "Anything that makes you feel this good is worth it to me. ..." Oh yes, he was a great man. Twice, he did it! The first time when we built the synagogue, then when we enlarged the synagogue... We're not wealthy people. I mean, we're not poor but [this meant a lot]. He used to call it "My wife's synagogue" ... I felt very good there. I didn't feel like anything in the other synagogue. A piece of meat. A piece of meat sitting in the chair there and wearing a hat. ... I was emancipated before they invented the word.

Rhoda Angel was emancipated, in her thoughts and her actions. She thought for herself and acted on her ideas. Angel was one of the women, traditionally raised but independently minded, who was part of the Women's Group and who gave it its particular character: decorous, spirited and effective.

V.1.2.2 The Women's Group

This was a year of "Firsts." We formed a Women's Group which fulfilled its promise and blossomed into a useful arm of Synagogue Activity. Under the outstanding leadership of Anita Levine and an active and most enthusiastic nucleus of ladies, we have enjoyed some very stimulating meetings – all most interestingly recorded by our most capable secretary Bea Brasloff, whose minutes are a joy to listen to and will prove to be an invaluable historical record of the activities of our Synagogue.²⁵⁴

The minutes carefully recorded by Beatrice Brasloff and lovingly kept by Saretta Levitan, first editor of the Synagogue Bulletin, together with the set of Bulletins Levitan has preserved, help to build up a picture of women's involvement in the life of the shul. This picture shows the

²⁵² Incorporated 1914.

²⁵³ JPPS: Jewish Peretz and People's Schools and Peretz Schools, where the community met before they built their own home.

²⁵⁴ From the Synagogue Bulletin "Year-End Review." Vol. 1, No. 6, 1969.

lively hybridity that characterized the community, a flow of activities and ideas in which there was not just one way to do things, no single fixed narrative, as was natural in a community that saw itself as experimental. Where women were concerned, as noted above, traditional attitudes to gender roles coexisted with groundbreaking innovations.

The Women's Group, as recorded in the minutes, was decorous, these were "ladies" ... whose decorum in no way prevented them from enjoying themselves and each other's company. Inspired, perhaps, by the work done in other synagogue Sisterhoods they would have known, they raised funds, cooked and baked, supplied food and flowers, created and edited a Bulletin, started a library and a telephone committee and connected with the Reconstructionist movement by sending out *The Reconstructionist* to selected college students.²⁵⁵ The community would not have managed without them. However, this way of doing things did not suit all the women. It would have been worlds apart, for example, from the style of anarchist feminist Emma Goldman, whom Shulamis Yelin knew and admired. Even without evoking Goldman, one might imagine that some women would have questioned the need for a separate Women's Group in a Reconstructionist community premised on gender equality. A tantalizingly brief indication that this was the case is recorded in the minutes of the second meeting of the group:

Mrs. S. Becker stated that there still is some resistance to the formation of the Women's Group, and in view of this fact, our chairman considered it a most opportune time for a frank expression of opinion on the subject. In the introductory letter sent to the women members of the Congregation Mrs. Levine explained the purposes of the Group, and the areas in which it planned to function. The fact that as of this date (Nov. 21st) over one-third of the women in the congregation have already sent in their membership seems ample proof that they are interested, and wish to help the Synagogue, particularly in activities such

²⁵⁵ *T'Hiyah* was a project of the Reconstructionist Women's Organizations to disseminate Reconstructionist thought to interested or potentially interested university students and Hillel leaders by sending them gift subscriptions to *The Reconstructionist* magazine. Ethel Abramovitch chaired this committee at Montreal's Reconstructionist Synagogue and sent gift subscriptions to the libraries at McGill and Sir George Williams universities and McDonald College as well as to interested students at these institutions.

as the Kovod Fund, Library, Bulletin, etc. Naturally, those attending the meeting supported the Group, and many re-iterated their reasons for joining.²⁵⁶

If only the “frank expression of opinion” had been recorded by the highly competent secretary, Beatrice Brasloff! It surely would have made interesting reading.

The resistance to the existence of the Women’s Group appears to have faded; there is no further reference in the minutes to it and none of the people I interviewed mentioned it. This may be because the Women’s Group was not the only way that women in the community could be involved in shul life. Women took part in all of the thought, cultural life and public discussion that men did. The Bulletin records, for example, that Women’s Group chairman Anita Levine offered a commentary on the Torah portion of the week, as did Joy Meyer; Levine also led a discussion about “Youth in Revolt,” Harriet Saalheimer discussed the Shulchan Arukh (Jewish law code), Gertrude Krashinsky made a presentation based on an article in *The Reconstructionist*, Shulamis Yelin made many presentations on literary themes and published prose and poetry in the Bulletin, Marion Schauber led musical evenings and other women were involved musically as well; Sylvia Horwich, who had come with her husband Herb from Halifax was “very involved,” and “could lead anything, discuss anything.”²⁵⁷ Some of these women participated in the Women’s Group, others did not. For those who did, involvement meant both good work and good fun and also community building, as the following illustrations taken from the Women’s Group meeting minutes and the Bulletins will illustrate.

In her letter of invitation dated October 28, 1968, Anita Levine invites women to “participate more actively in the affairs of our young, dynamic Synagogue,” whether by making a “special contribution” or by simply giving support and encouragement. A nucleus of women had

²⁵⁶ Women’s Group meeting minutes, November 21, 1968.

²⁵⁷ Kay Wolofsky interview by author Interview by author, 22 June 2001.

already established a series of committees and chosen chairmen for them, giving a range of options for involvement.²⁵⁸ The invitation also notes plans for the first year, which “are focused on getting to know one another a little better by working together on a variety of endeavours.” It is important to note in this connection that the activities of the Women’s Group made a critical contribution to community building by creating ways for women members to get to know each other. Socializing, the weaving of interpersonal bonds, was an important activity, one that helped create a community out of a collection of diverse individuals. The women met at each other’s homes and served each other “refreshments” before getting down to business, a way of getting to know each other that worked well, extending at times quite late into the evening as for example, on Wednesday, May 28, 1969, when the group met until midnight, at which time “Mrs. Levine expressed the thanks of all present to Mrs. Becker for her warm hospitality.”

Besides getting to know one another, the women helped to build community in many other ways, through the different committees and other initiatives they launched. Two examples are the Kiddush Committee and the Kovod [Honour] Fund.

| | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| ²⁵⁸ Honorary Advisor..... | Mrs. Lavy M. Becker |
| Chairman | Mrs. Theodore Levine |
| Vice-Chairman | Mrs. C.Z. Godlovitch |
| Treasurer..... | Mrs. H. Goldstein |
| Secretary..... | Mrs. Reuben Brasloff |
| Membership Chairman | Mrs. Lazarus Tinkoff |
| Ways and Means Chairman..... | Mrs. A.L. Lazar |
| Telephone Chairman | Mrs. Michael Drazner |
| Bulletin Chairman..... | Mrs. Benjamin Levitan |
| T’Hiyah Chairman..... | Mrs. Harry Abramovitch |
| Kovod Fund Chairmen | Mrs. Michael Drazner and Mrs. Warren Horn |
| Library Chairman..... | Mrs. Johanna Kooperstock |
| Festivals Chairman | Mrs. Stephen Barber |
| Kiddush Chairman | Mrs. Cecil Pinto |
| Youth Chairman | Mrs. J.P. Wolofsky |
| Hospitality Chairman..... | Mrs. Michael Drazner |
| Program Comm. Representative..... | Mrs. Shulamith Yelin |
| Chanukah Food Sale Chairman..... | Mrs. A.L. Lazar |

Only Shulamith Yelin and Johanna Kooperstock are not listed under their husband’s names. Yelin’s husband had been an invalid for many years and was not part of the shul family. Reasons for Kooperstock unknown at present. It is interesting to note that there are two typed signature lines at the end of Chairman Levine’s letter, the first reads Anita G. Levine, the second, Mrs. Theodore Levine. Is this perhaps hybridity at work?

The Kiddush Committee was set up by the Women's Group in order to coordinate provision of a light snack to be offered after services on Shabbat morning, so that community members could relax together and socialize. Chair Irmgard Pinto, (Rhoda Angel and Sheba Goldstein are listed as members), writes:

I [...] would like to explain to new members that since we started the Kiddushim after services on Saturdays, we found that everyone enjoys them and it emphasizes the warmth and personal feeling which is such an integral part of our congregation. After our Friday evening services and scheduled program, it is most enjoyable to sit down over a leisurely cup of coffee and cake and continue the discussion.²⁵⁹

The simple practice of unwinding together over coffee and cake, perhaps continuing a discussion that had been initiated during the morning, or maybe getting to know a fellow shul-member a little better, was tremendously important to the community-building process and helped to foster the "Culture of Conversation" that developed among the congregation (see below). This short period of relaxation after services offered a natural way for people to meet and talk face-to-face. A different kind of vehicle for sharing information with the community as a whole was the Kovod Fund.

The Kovod Fund was introduced by the Women's Group as a way to honour or remember "dear ones." In their initial announcement, chairmen Heather Drazner and Ida Horn invited community members to consider such occasions indicative of a thriving group as "bon voyage, academic achievement, graduation" in addition to birth, bar mitzvah, engagement, marriage, and "In Memorium." Donations to the fund and the reasons for them were listed in the Bulletin, giving members the opportunity to share the small and large high points that make life meaningful and also to share their sorrows and grief by giving a donation to their community and by giving other members the chance to congratulate them or offer condolences. The first Bulletin listing for the fund includes wishes for speedy recoveries to

²⁵⁹ Synagogue Bulletin, Vol. 1, No. 1, November 14, 1968.

three ailing community members and a 29th wedding anniversary. Several birthdays are marked by gifts from multiple donors. As well, one woman's donation in memory of three family members is noted, as is a couple's donation in memory of their son. Donations recorded in the Bulletins over the years were made for many reasons, each one weaving another thread into the fabric of community, a fabric that was then there to cushion the blows of sorrow or to share joys as the occasion arose.

The spirit of fun that was alive and well in the community is evident in the announcement in the first the Synagogue Bulletin (Vol. 1, No. 1, Nov. 14, 1968) of the annual Hanukkah Party. The announcement promises that "this year again, a team of brilliant entertainers will satisfy your sense of humour, lovely ladies will serve delicious tidbits and cheerful company will warm your hearts" and further that "\$2.00 will buy you hours of friendly conversation, heaps of delicacies and a million laughs." The "delicacies" and "tidbits" are solicited on the next page through a poem, headed "First Project of the Women's Group: Chanukah Culinary Corner," that begins:

Bake or cook
Cook and bake
We will sell
Whatever you make.

A cookie, a cake
A blintz or a bagel
Get in the Kitchen
And make what you're able.

Jellies or jams
Pickles or chollas
Everything helps
To bring in the dollars ...

Continuing with more food-related fun for the women, following the poem there is a request for "ladies [...] to act as hostesses at the party," duties to include "service at tables, i.e.

replenishing plates and cups and asking guests for their wishes.” The women are asked to come early to “set the tables and arrange the pastry trays and prepare the coffee.”

The Women’s Group enjoyed getting to know each other and providing food and fun but they were in no way confined to this kind of role. If it seemed that they were being relegated inappropriately to the kitchen, the women protested, as in an undated, unsigned memo from the period during which a nucleus of women met, before the formal launch of the Women’s Group. The memo refers to the upcoming 8th Annual Reconstructionist Convention to be held that spring in Montreal and the Dedication Day ceremonies that would be part of it (see Chapter 6) and makes it quite clear that providing “home hospitality” would not take precedence over the women’s full participation in the conference:

We, of course, discussed the need for help for the conference and dedication. It was felt that the suggestion put forward at the last Executive meeting of home hospitality on the Friday evening was not such a good one. How can the ladies be expected to be present at the sessions during the day, prepare a meal for guests and then run out again to the Oneg Shabbat.²⁶⁰

Apart from the special circumstances of the Convention, hospitality was something that the women made a point of offering, as testified to by their initiation of a Hospitality Committee, chaired with enthusiasm by Heather Drazner. As detailed in the minutes, the duty of the committee would be “to greet new members, make them feel welcome, and introduce them to others.”²⁶¹ The function of welcoming new people was so important that the Women’s Group chairman went further to emphasize “the importance of each one of us acting as an unofficial member of the Hospitality Committee.” Nor was hospitality confined to women. Reuben Brasloff recalls that the shul’s first president, Manfred Saalheimer, was “a one-man welcoming

²⁶⁰ The memo continues “...although I have many times criticized the kitchen and its facilities [I] am inclined to agree with Mrs. Ship who said that if we had bigger and better facilities our synagogue would have already by now deteriorated to the catering establishment with which we disagree most strongly, as per the enclosed advertisement that Cecil [Pinto] clipped for me out of the Daily Commercial News.” This memo is almost certainly from Imgard Pinto as it refers to Cecil, her husband, and is written in a distinctive style recognizable from other of her signed letters and memos.

²⁶¹ Women’s Group minutes, October 28, 1968.

committee” and Jack Wolofsky too took on this role with unusual genuineness and warmth (see Chapter 7).

Many people remember the warm welcome offered by Hospitality Chair, Heather Drazner. Drazner herself recalls that besides welcoming people, she also made a list and called community members on their birthdays and anniversaries. She attended synagogue every week, but only after the master of welcome, Lavy Becker himself, had talked her into it:

If someone wasn't there: "Where are the Shermans this week?" If they weren't there the next week, they got a call. It was so warm when you came in. I went every week, I had never known anyone who went to shul every week, though my late father-in-law did. At first we went for the High Holidays. Lavy said, "How wonderful to see everyone!" He tried to involve us further by saying, "Supposing you came to shul for every High Holidays, it would be ½ of 1%, and then you came for every one of the Festivals, maybe 5%, and then and if you came ..." I laughed, I said "I'll try it."²⁶²

In the do-it-yourself spirit of the Women's Group and Lavy's Shul, Kay Wolofsky took on the challenge of organizing a youth group and became the first Chair of the Youth Committee. Wolofsky hired a series of youth group leaders, including J.J. Goldberg, an American who had come to McGill to study, and Hugh Segal, a high school student who at a remarkably young age was in touch with the former (1957 – 1963) Progressive Conservative Prime Minister of Canada, John Diefenbaker.²⁶³ The Bulletins chronicle a succession of different configurations of groups for different ages from 11 through 16 and include messages and letters from the leaders announcing or reporting on intense discussions of issues, including a request for a drummer from a band-in-formation and an intriguing invitation to youth from Manny Fineman to come and discuss problems that they "cannot discuss openly with their parents."

²⁶² Heather Drazner, telephone interview by author, 3 August 2004.

²⁶³ Both Goldberg and Segal went on to distinguished public careers, Goldberg as award-winning journalist, author and lecturer and Editor-in-Chief of the Jewish national newsweekly the *Forward*; Segal as an eminent Canadian Conservative, political strategist and Senator.

One youth innovation that generated considerable pride was a *sukkah* built in the geodesic form invented by one of the most exuberant, visionary social thinkers of the day, Buckminster Fuller. This original structure made it into the local papers (see Figure 11) and was a wonderful expression of Reconstructionist values and creativity, as the Bulletin makes clear:

Buckminster Fuller inspired it; Lawrence Wolofsky and Stephen Wertheimer constructed it; Heather Drazner, Kay Wolofsky and Myra Rothman and their children adorned it. And so our own unique Sukkah in the form of a geodesic dome came to be. We are indeed very fortunate, for through the ingenuity of our workers we were able to be witness to a masterful rendition of the blend of our deep heritage caught in twentieth century vitality. The Sukkah was covered with the traditional Shakh and lush fruits of our harvest were suspended from the roof. It was through the beauty of our Kiddush which we chanted with our Rabbi in the Sukkah that we could truly appreciate our festival. We are very grateful.
[Signed] Marion Silver.²⁶⁴

The Youth Groups and the different other committees that the Women's Group started supported community life in many different ways, by weaving bonds of friendship among the women and also by accomplishing a range of purposes important to the shul's functioning, all in the do-it-yourself spirit of the group. The fact that women could choose to contribute through the kitchen and other supporting roles but were not confined to these meant that gender role definitions were fluid, given the times, and that the traditional and the innovative lived side by side.

Fluidity and flow were characteristics of the community generally. Led by Lavy Becker and the core group, who all had much to talk about, people talked and listened to each other a lot and so created what might be seen as a "culture of conversation" in the shul.

V.2 A Culture of Conversation

One of the most persistent and energetically-made points people who I interviewed made about Lavy's Shul was that the discussions that took place during the Saturday morning

²⁶⁴ Synagogue Bulletin, Vol. 5 No. 2, September 28, 1972.

services were wonderful. These discussions, characterized by intensity and meaningfulness, were a defining feature of the community. Engaging people's sense of meaning, often at the deepest levels, by relating to core values or pressing social issues helped people make connections and glean insights. Their sense of the world was enlarged, adjusted or reworked and this was done in community so that the community became a precious and meaningful place.

Shabbat morning during services was not the only time people talked and discussed. Talk continued after services, during the informal period when a light snack was available. In addition, the Programme Committee organized presentations of many different kinds, as illustrated below, and these too generated lots of discussion.

Overall, the ambience in "Lavy's Shul" was characterized by the openness and engagement that makes for good conversations. One factor may have been that there was no need for the kind of repressed silence concerning the Holocaust, the inability to speak or respond, that Franklin Bialystock (2000) documents in Canada's Jewish community after the Second World War. For many Canadians, until Holocaust museums began to find ways to tell the story of the Shoah, survivors were only comfortable with other survivors; there was a separation between those who knew and those who didn't know how to understand. But in this as in other areas, the population in the shul community was mixed. Lavy Becker was able to talk and be open because he had seen for himself what had happened in Europe and had been able to respond by helping people; he had also worked to create a narrative in response to what he had seen by writing his "Synagogue Vignettes." Survivor Erika Barber was a strong and vocal woman, one who was able to speak about her past. Many of the people whose paths had led to Lavy Becker's door had experienced difficulties or dislocations of one kind or another in their pasts,

through immigration or poverty or other reasons. All of this opened people's minds and hearts and fostered a flow of feeling and communication.

Finally, seeking truths through discussion and debate is a fundamental Jewish practice, starting with the study of Torah, which is traditionally done in community and is a way to love God and to explore the universes of meaning contained in God's word. This understanding of discussion was part of Lavy Becker's background and that of other members as well, adding another layer of resonance, especially to the exchanges on Shabbat mornings.

For all of the foregoing reasons, the "culture of conversation" label seems to fit well. There was a flow of feeling and ideas on many levels. This section illustrates some of the streams that fed the flow, the different kinds of elements that were part of the ongoing conversation of synagogue life. The section begins with an overview of the topics on the shul agenda, as reported in the Synagogue Bulletin, including the contributions of Lavy Becker and his travels and of other shul members and their meaningful experiences. Next is a look at the role played in the general flow of ideas by Kaplan and the Eisensteins. Finally, there a glimpse of the community in full flight, having fun and processing many levels of meaning at their 1967 Hanukkah party.

V.2.1 A View from the Bulletins

The set of Synagogue Bulletins preserved by founding editor Saretta Levitan contains a wealth of detail about the kinds of issues that engaged the energies of the shul community, both in discussion and debate and in other kinds of actions. The Bulletin itself, an initiative of the Women's Group, served to facilitate communications, as shul President Stephen S. Barber's appreciative message in the first issue anticipated:

Our ladies deserve our gratitude for having taken the initiative and responsibility for bringing out a Bulletin that will help us in many ways. It will be a record of the

events in our congregation, of our activities, experiments, problems, joys and sorrows – the latter, may they be few.²⁶⁵

In addition to community-building-and-maintaining features such as the “Milestones” column, marking births, deaths, marriages and other important moments and the regular feature that noted the details of who was being honoured by whom through contributions to the “Kovod Fund,” the Bulletins record a range of topics scheduled by the Programme Committee, whose first joint chairs were Herb Winer and Shulamis Yelin. Clearly aware that preparing and presenting a topic for discussion was an important way for members to weave their personal narratives into the fabric of community as well as a way to achieve an engaging program, Winer and Yelin wrote:

Our program is built on the framework of the Jewish calendar, in which Shabbat, and the *sidrah* [Torah portion] of the week, provide a central study period. We shall continue this year to enlist the participation of members of the congregation in leading the discussion on the weekly *sidrah*, an experience that is beneficial to the discussion leader as well as to the congregation.

The subjects addressed by community members and also by invited guests constitute a map of what was meaningful to shul members during the “Lavy’s Shul” years.

Reconstructionism was a topic, as members wanted both to inform themselves and to think about the direction of their movement. This kind of thinking was nourished by visits from Mordecai Kaplan and the Eisensteins (see below) as well as by members’ excursions to the annual Reconstructionist Conventions. Members also contributed by leading discussions: Gertrude Krashinsky presented the topic “Towards a Radical Reconstructionism,” based on two articles in the Reconstructionist Magazine.²⁶⁶ Outsiders were also invited in to speak on

²⁶⁵Vol 1. No. 1 Nov. 14, 1968.

²⁶⁶ Reported in the Synagogue Bulletin, Vol. 1. No.3 Feb 12, 1969.

Reconstructionism, notably the four “erudite and enlightening” lectures given by Rabbi Maurice Cohen of congregation Shaare Zion, who had studied with Kaplan.²⁶⁷

In addition to Reconstructionism as a topic, a series of other issues engaged the attention of the shul community including, as indicated in the subheadings below: Youth, Jewish Identity, Identity Politics in a Changing Quebec, Israel, Literature, Music and the Arts, Comings and Goings and Lavy Becker and his Travels.

V.2.1.1 Youth

As the new generation began to come into voice and to define itself, “Youth” became an energetically debated issue. A string of presentations on “Youth and the Synagogue today,”²⁶⁸ “Youth in Social Revolt,”²⁶⁹ “Youth and Activism,”²⁷⁰ and “Youth and the Establishment”²⁷¹ tried to come to terms with the phenomenon of a new generational identity-in-the-making. McGill students Peter Schizgal, J.J. Goldberg and Lipa Roth animated a panel, moderated by Stanley M. Cohen, on “The Alienation of Jewish Youth from the Jewish Community.” In a shul workshop on Youth and Reconstructionism, Herbert Winer addressed the question “What value for young people has Judaism as an evolving religious civilization?” Dr. W. Yaphe tackled “Reconstructionism and the New Morality” and Stanley Cohen spoke about “A Critical Look at Jewish Education.” Intent on involving the new generation in the excitement of the movement, the shul also announced its plan to send two of its young people to Camp Cejwin to experience Kaplan and the annual Convention for themselves. Using the Bulletin to help them communicate with the rest of the community, the youth themselves reported on

²⁶⁷ Reported in the Synagogue Bulletin, Vol. 1 No. 6 June 27, 1969.

²⁶⁸ Led by Michael Krashinsky on Saturday, April 16. Announced in Vol. 1, No. 4, April 15, 1969.

²⁶⁹ Vol. 1 No. 6 June 27, 1969 notes that Women’s Group Chair Anita Levine would be leading a discussion based on an article by Harold Schulweiss from *Viewpoints*.

²⁷⁰ Vol. 1 No. 6, June 27, 1969, as part of the “Year in Review,” thanks Jean-Claude Lasry for his excellent chairing of a Panel Discussion on this subject.

²⁷¹ Vol. 3 No. 2 December 7, 1970: Pierre Lasry to show his National Film Board film called “Christopher’s Matinee.”

their activities and discussions, which ranged from Reconstructionist Judaism and Zionism to film, sex and drugs.²⁷²

V.2.1.2 Jewish Identity

It was not just the identity of the new generation that was in question during the “Lavy’s Shul” years. “Identity” generally, and Jewish identity in particular was an absorbing issue. Shulamis Yelin explored the issue through literature in a presentation entitled “Wiesel and Bellow, Two Roads Home.”²⁷³ Prompted perhaps by the Israeli Supreme Court discussion of “Who is a Jew” the community had a “lively and controversial” discussion on the subject of Jewish identity during Shabbat services.²⁷⁴ Jean-Claude Lasry’s presentation entitled “Are you a Jew? Or an Israelite?” contributed an intense taste of his experiences growing up Jewish in Morocco, where “Jew” was a pejorative and derogatory term, where “progressive Jews” did not send their children to Jewish schools and so Lasry went to French school to learn about “our ancestors ‘les Gaulois.’” As reported in the Bulletin, Lasry’s story of coming to Canada and finding new roots is a classic account of the journey from shame to pride that would be engaged upon in succeeding decades by other oppressed minorities, starting with the American Negroes, whom he cites: “I started to look at myself and at the other Jews [...] with Jewish eyes. And I was proud, proud. I started signing Jew, defiantly, on application forms, never more Israelite of Hebrew. [...] Remember “Jew is beautiful” like “Black is Beautiful” [...] I am a Jew.”

²⁷² Synagogue Bulletin, Vol. 3, No. 3.

²⁷³ Synagogue Bulletin, Vol. 3, No. 2.

²⁷⁴ Reported in the Synagogue Bulletin, Vol. 1, No. 13 June 18, 1970.

V.2.1.3 Identity Politics in a Changing Quebec

The topic of a special panel on “The Position of Minorities in a Changing Quebec” signals a critical shift in Quebec’s political life and the changing relationships among its collectivities.²⁷⁵

The English-speaking community that had been so powerful and played such an important role in the development of Montreal and Quebec was forced to face the fact that it was in fact a “minority”. If and if so, how, the new surge of Quebec nationalism would prove problematic for Jews and other minorities was a question of vital interest. To address the issues, shul member and McGill Law Professor Jacob Ziegel organized a panel consisting of Prof. F.R. Scott Q.C. former Dean of law at McGill, Saul Hayes Q.C. Executive Vice President of the Canadian Jewish Congress and Dr. Victor Goldbloom, member of National Assembly of Quebec. Shul members Perry Meyer and Stanley Cohen shared their insights and expertise on the related topic of education for Jews in Quebec: Cohen with a “probing discussion” on “Key issues for Jews in Quebec Education”²⁷⁶ and Meyer with a discussion of the Canadian Jewish Council brief to Bill 28.²⁷⁷ Another dimension of the changing landscape of collective identities was brought into play through the screening on January 8, 1971 of Pierre Lasry’s film “You are on Indian Land.”²⁷⁸

If Quebec life and politics were present as one focus of identity and engagement for shul members, Israel was equally present as another.

V.2.1.4 Israel

Community members engaged with the multi-faceted reality of Israel in different ways, from the cultural and light-hearted, to struggles with political and ethical issues, to financial

²⁷⁵ November 18, 1969, Revised Programme Notes.

²⁷⁶ Reported as part of the “Year in Review,” Vol. 1 No. 6 June 27, 1969.

²⁷⁷ Vol 4. No. 4, October 18, 1971. Meyer was a member of the Committee on the Position of Jews in the Educational System of Quebec, and had been a member of the Quebec’s Superior Council of Education since its inception in 1964.

²⁷⁸ Vol. 3 No. 2, December 7, 1970.

contributions. As well, some members made the personal commitment to support Israel by going to live there and their journeys were followed and supported by the community.

Fun and creativity were part of the “Purim on the Kibbutz” night planned by the Women’s Group, where the festivities were enhanced by a “group of young people [who] will lead us in traditional dances and songs.”²⁷⁹ The community’s interest in art met its love of Israel in a “Spring Exhibition of Israeli Art” announced with an attractive flyer addressed to all in the Montreal Jewish community who might be interested. Providing a counterbalance to the congregation’s interests in Israeli art and culture were more serious issues. Reconstructionists had been committed Zionists from the beginning, following Mordecai Kaplan’s lead and members of Montreal’s Reconstructionist Synagogue were no exception. As thinking people, they struggled after the Six-Day War to understand the different kinds of implications of Israel’s victory. Examples were Jacob Ziegel’s “courageous presentation” entitled “Are we too pro Israeli?”²⁸⁰ or the questions about “The Moral Position of Israel” that were debated at the 10th annual conference of the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Fellowships at Cejwin Camps, New York.

Four years after Pope John Paul II proclaimed his Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostre Aetatae*, members of Lavy’s shul were encouraged to attend a lecture by Father Flannery, author of *The Anguish of the Jews* on “Israel and the Christian

²⁷⁹ Vol. 1. No. 3 Feb 12, 1969. The women speculated that “If Esther had met Ahashverus / In nineteen sixty-nine” they might have gone to a Kibbutz, where:

They might have danced the hora
Munched peeta and falafel
While Vashti bit her long nails
And Haman felt just awful.

The poem continues, paying homage to heroes ...

From Ether’s sainted uncle
Through Kaplan, wondrous wise
To our own Rabbi Lavy M.
We favor Mordechais!

²⁸⁰ Synagogue Bulletin. Vol. 1 No. 6 June 27, 1969. Year in Review.

Reaction.”²⁸¹ Flannery’s presentation would likely have been strongly pro-Israeli, although the Christian world was certainly not unanimously so in the wake of the Six-Day War. A letter forwarded by CJC Executive Vice-President Alan Rose to Lavy Becker puts the problem succinctly: “Since the Arab-Israeli war of June 1967 the image of the State of Israel has deteriorated in the world and in the United States. During this same period Israel has assumed ever greater dimensions in the hearts and minds of Jews everywhere. This divergence in appreciation [has engendered] tension in Jewish-Christian relations.”²⁸²

Like others throughout the Jewish world, and especially like other Canadian Jews, who were generous contributors, members of “Lavy’s Shul” wanted to show their support for Israel by donating money. Vol. 1, No. 12 of the Bulletin contains an appeal from President Herb Winer to members of the congregation, encouraging them to buy Israel Bonds. Winer’s appeal is, however, tempered by his subtle suggestion that people should seek multiple channels for involvement, that buying Israel Bonds was only one way to be involved and that people should not be content to be only “cheque-book Zionists,” to use Tulchinsky’s phrase.²⁸³

The central position of Israel in Reconstructionist thought requires no extra elaboration. The importance of Israel Bonds as one essential way of supporting the economic needs of Israel also requires no argument. We are therefore cooperating with the Montreal Israel Bond office by soliciting our members to encourage purchase of Israel Bonds during the next few weeks.²⁸⁴ [..]

The appeal seems to have been successful over a couple of years, since the June 14, 1972 issue of the Bulletin proudly announces that \$17,500 worth of bonds were sold and that “In

²⁸¹ *The Anguish of the Jews: Twenty-Three Centuries of Anti-Semitism* by Edward H. Flannery was first published in 1964, just months before *Nostre Aetate*. Reported in the Synagogue Bulletin, Vol. 1 No. 9 December 21, 1969.

²⁸² The letter, dated July 9, 1969, is from the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations at Sexton Hall University, South Orange, N.J. and is in the Lavy Becker Fonds, the National Archives of Canada.

²⁸³ Gerald Tulchinsky used the phrase “cheque-book Zionism” to describe the American response to Zionism between the wars. *Branching Out: The Transformation of the Canadian Jewish Community*. (Toronto: Stoddart, 1998).

²⁸⁴ Synagogue Bulletin, Vol. 1 No. 12, April 29, 1970.

recognition of exceptional worth in proportion to the size of our Congregation, the Bond Office presented our Congregation¹ with a special plaque.”²⁸⁵

That shul members went beyond “cheque-book Zionism” is illustrated by moving messages from the Krashinskys and Mordecai Etziony (see the section entitled “Comings and Goings” on page 218). As well, President Stephen Barber was very involved with Israel affairs and reported back to the community. In February of 1969, he published a letter in the Bulletin, informing the congregation about a 2½ week visit to Israel in his capacity as Executive Director of the Canadian Society for the Weizmann Institute, from which he had just returned. The Canadian Society had decided to honour former (1963 - 1968) Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson by establishing a Protein Science Research Chair in his name. The Institute had elected Pearson an Honorary Fellow, “a distinction reserved for a very small and select circle of scientists, statesmen and civic leaders” in the spring of 1967 but the Six-Day war had delayed the induction ceremony, which then took place in December of 1968. Barber writes:

Space doesn't allow me to describe to you in detail the very impressive and moving ceremony before an audience of some 600 distinguished scientists and laymen from all over the world, including a group of 60 members of the Canadian Society. [...] Pearson's historical role in the destinies of Israel during the past 21 years was stressed by several speakers including Abba Eban. [...] Pearson in a small intimate circle said: “The greatest moment of my life was at the U.N. when the State of Israel was created in 1947.”²⁸⁶

Even allowing for some hyperbole in the moment reported in the last sentence cited here, Pearson's buoyancy reflects both his own sentiments and the positive approach towards Israel that his government had taken, a far cry from the “None is Too Many” attitude towards Jews

²⁸⁵ Synagogue Bulletin, Vol. 4 No. 8, June 14, 1972.

²⁸⁶ Synagogue Bulletin, Vol. 1, No. 3 Feb. 1969.

Lester Pearson headed the Canadian delegation to the UN from 1946 to 1956 and chaired the General Assembly's Special Committee on Palestine. He presided over the Seventh Session of the General Assembly in 1952-1953 and in 1957 was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in defusing the 1956 Suez Canal Crisis, at which time he created the International Peacekeeping Force.

and the non-committal policy towards Israel of the Mackenzie King government that had been in power when the State of Israel was created (see note 33 above).

V.2.1.5 Literature, Music and the Arts

Literature, music and the arts had a strong presence in the synagogue community, adding channels for self-expression for those members that way inclined and richness and diversity to the range of elements in the overall conversation of shul life.

Lavy Becker liked art, as demonstrated by the care and pleasure he took in commissioning for the synagogue a special *ner tamid* and also the stained glass windows that the community grew so attached to. It was fitting, then, that the shul community would have chosen to honour Becker's contributions to Allied Jewish Community Services (AJCS) as well as his "love of art in general and [...] particular admiration for Esther Wertheimer's work" by donating a sculpture entitled "Sacred Lights" for the new AJCS building on Cote Sainte Catherine street, the first gift of art that the institution received.²⁸⁷

Music was present in many forms in the shul, with different members sharing their talents. Shulamis Yelin honoured "Jewish Music Month" with a musical talk on Jewish Folk Music in which she illustrated and discussed "varieties of folk songs, what gave rise to them, how they expressed the changing experiences of our people."²⁸⁸ Shul member Marion Schauber directed the Beth El Choir, which performed at the shul on occasion. The Bulletin's 1969 "Year in Review" (Vol. 1, No. 6) notes that there had been several musical evenings that year including "a delightful Cantata directed by our own Marion Schauber and featuring the Beth El Synagogue choir, with accompaniment by Cathy Adelman" and also an evening in honour of

²⁸⁷ A letter of appreciation from Monty Berger, AJCS President and Manuel G. Batshaw, Executive Director, dated February 9, 1973, is reproduced in Vol. 5, No. 5 of the Bulletin.

²⁸⁸ Letter from Lavy Becker in Vol. 5 No. 5, February 27, 1973 expresses disappointment that only 50 members were there to enjoy the talk and invites feedback as to the reasons why.

Shabbat Shirah which included performances by shul members Ben Stowlow, viola, Robert Mayerovitch, piano, Fanny Levitan, mezzo soprano and Sam Levitan, piano. As well, Yehuda Vineberg made a presentation on "Aspects of Jewish Music" and then led the audience in folk singing. Musical experiments included a wonderful playing of the *Kol Nidre* prayer on Yom Kippur eve by Annabelle Ship, following which the congregation "sat spellbound, long after Annabelle had finished."²⁸⁹ Another powerful musical experience is recounted by Reuben Brasloff, and occurred when a bar mitzvah boy asked his teacher to play in shul:

Another year, when Wally Levitt was bar mitzvah, our service was honoured with a unique instrumental closing by Walter Joachim, the world renowned cellist. He came as a guest of the Levitt family, yet on this day, at the conclusion of services, he sat next to the Bimah, closed his eyes and played. He carried all of us along with him to a most unusual spiritual high. Joachim was a very devoted secular Jew, I am told, but was not exactly a regular Synagogue goer. He taught cello to a number of our Synagogue members, including Wally and when he asked Wally what he would like as a gift, all Wally really wanted was for his teacher to play for him on that occasion. Walter Joachim obliged and this way Wally shared his very unique bar mitzvah present with our whole congregation. Shulamis Yelin was so moved that she wrote a beautiful heart-rending poem lauding both Wally's reading and Joachim's music.²⁹⁰

Shulamis Yelin contributed prose and poetry to the Bulletin from time to time, as well as taking over from founding editor Saretta Levitan in 1972. She was also part of a special event when the shul hosted a number of Canadian Jewish writers, in Montreal to attend a conference on Yiddish being held under the auspices of the Canadian Jewish Congress. A Friday evening service was held with readings in four languages: Yelin read Yiddish, Jonathan Yaphe in English, Emanuel Bach in Hebrew and Jean-Claude Lasry in French. The guest speaker was American poet and writer Jacob Glatstein, who addressed the congregation in Yiddish.²⁹¹ Four years later, having taken over editorship of the Bulletin, Shulamis Yelin re-introduced Glatstein. The Passover festival was approaching and Yelin included in the Bulletin a verse

²⁸⁹ "Beautiful music is our history," published in the January/February 2003 Synagogue Bulletin.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁹¹ Vol. 1, No. 5, April 14, 1969. [I think there is an error here. Even though Vol. 1 No. 5 is dated April 14, Vol. 1 No. 4, the preceding number is dated April 15 and No. 6 is June. Likely this should read May 14, 1969].

from the Song of Songs, read at this time. Her commentary beneath the verse raised the Passover theme of freedom, on many levels: “freedom from bondage, or freedom from an unpleasant chore, from bodily pain or from mental anguish” and “its implication in freeing the earth for growth flowering in springtime.” She goes on to note that Jews in the 20th century added two new dates to commemorate in the spring: the Uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto and the Birth of the State of Israel. The freshness and intensity of Yelin’s writing in the following paragraphs suggest that she is using the medium of the Bulletin to articulate her feelings and position and to share them with the community.

The Warsaw uprising rattled the world with the smashing of the ancient stereotype of the long-suffering subservient Jew in an inimical world. The new State of Israel electrified it and set a new standard for national pride and self-respect. At last Hillel’s adage was correctly interpreted: *Thou shalt love thy brother as thyself* begins with a proper image of one’s self. And the Jewish image has taught self-respect to many nations.

But the *High Cost of Becoming* must never be forgotten, and in the spirit of remembering, we present two poems written during the Holocaust by two outstanding Yiddish Poets.²⁹²

Of the two powerful poems included in the Bulletin, the first is by Glatstein and the next by survivor poet Avraham Sutzkever. A sense of the tone is given by the opening stanzas of each.

From Glatstein’s “Good Night, Wide World,” written in Yiddish when the news of the crematoria first reached America, translated by Marie Syrkin:

Good Night, Wide World
Big stinking world!
Not you but I slam shut the door,
With my long gabardine,
My fiery, yellow patch,
With head erect,
And at my sole command,
I go back into the ghetto.²⁹³

From *Spiritual Soil* by Avraham Sutzkever, translated by Channa Faerstein:

²⁹² Synagogue Bulletin, Vol. 5 No. 6, April 2, 1973.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

The sun has made a wager: it will melt
 The iciness that's gelled about my bones.
 As if an overcoat could ever warm
 A world gone dead. The streets of Tel Aviv
 Bustle with life. A hullaballo. Look: each
 Minute grows old. An "extra" down the drain,
 A Yemenite Messiah holds a speech.
 And as a beehive magnified – a swarm
 Of faces, Strange, these are the very ones
 That Vilna, Kovna, Grodna burned to ashes in their kilns.²⁹⁴

Yelin's evocation of the Warsaw Ghetto, the Holocaust and Israel and her inclusion of the poems were a strong contribution by an individualist to keeping memory open, alive, tough and real in the shul community. Other members also shared deeply meaningful moments, in shul and also through the pages of the Bulletin.

V.2.1.6 Comings and Goings

The decisions of two shul members to go beyond "cheque-book Zionism" are chronicled in the Bulletin. A letter originally written to Shulamis Yelin by Dave and Gert Krashinsky, "Our Members in Residence in Israel," was published in January of 1970. In full emotional flight, the Krashinskys use Kaplan's terms to describe the sense of meaning and purpose that they found in Israel:

[...] As for us, Israel has not disappointed us. True, daily life has many annoyances and inconveniences, but they seem so trivial in the context of the whole happening. It is impossible to describe the feelings of "fullness of life, growth of the soul, salvation" at being part of the majority society in the midst of our own people, in our own land. In spite of being so far from our families and friends, in an apartment lacking many conveniences and familiar possessions, we really feel at home. We feel wanted and necessary and really part of the full society. [...] ²⁹⁵

Another instance of a shul member taking the leap and moving to Israel is foreshadowed in an emotion-filled poem by Mordecai Etziony written "on the occasion of a recent trip to Israel."

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁵ Synagogue Bulletin, Vol. 1 No. 10 January 26, 1970.

Entitled “At the West Wall” and headed Jerusalem, Erev Shabbat, 10 Av 5729, July 25, 1969, it is signed “Mordecai ben Shmuel Moshe, Called Etziony, (from Montreal, Canada)” and begins:

Peace be unto thee, peace,
O, Jerusalem,
The old-renewed
Source of our longings!

Peace be unto thee, the Wall,
Remnant of our Temple,
Soaked with our tears
Through two millennia!

From a distant land,
Saturated with frost and tempest,
A son had come to thee
To prize thy stones. [...] ²⁹⁶

The April 29, 1970 issue of the Bulletin continues the story with the following announcement headed *Shalom L'Hitraot*:

How does one say Good-Bye?? We're very proud of being a “do-it-yourself” Congregation and that was always very simple while we had someone like our beloved Doctor Mordecai Etziony who is our Parnass, Chazan, Historian, Hebraic Scholar and even handyman! [...] Dr. Etziony's moving few words of farewell at the Seder finalized the fact that he is making his Aliyah to Israel [...] We hope the Kiddush cup he takes with him as our small tribute will remind him that we'd enjoy hearing from him often. [...] ²⁹⁷

Not all comings and going in Montreal's Reconstructionist Synagogue were as dramatic as the *aliyah* of Mordecai Etziony or the Krashinskys. New people continued to be attracted to the option that Lavy Becker and his shul were offering, while others moved away. A notable departure is recorded in the September 28, 1972 issue of the Bulletin. Here Jean-Claude Lasry published an open letter of thanks to the congregation on the eve of his departure from the shul. Having been elected President of the Association of Francophone Sephardic Jews in Montreal, he was leaving to play an important role in developing the sector within Montreal Jewry where, ethnically and linguistically, he belonged.

²⁹⁶ Synagogue Bulletin, Vol. 1 No. 8, October 28, 1969.

²⁹⁷ Synagogue Bulletin, Vol. 1, No. 12, April 29, 1970.

Lasry went on to play an important role in the development of the francophone Sephardic community, which had been embryonic when he had arrived with his family in 1956. The fact that his letter was published in French in the Bulletin is noteworthy. Although some, like Stephen Barber, were fluent in French and wanted to introduce more of Quebec's majority language into shul life, most people felt much more at home in English. But even if there had been more French introduced, and the occasional Sephardic custom, melody or story as well, this would have been no substitute in Lasry's case for working with his community towards the definition of a full social, cultural and political collective identity, as he went on to do. In his letter, Lasry articulates the role that the Reconstructionist Synagogue played in the development of his sense of Jewish identity and community. In referring at one point to the Reconstructionist "Kehila," he suggests that the broader Reconstructionist network functioned as Kaplan wanted it to, as a social, cultural and political entity.

Le 7 mars, 1972, les membres de la Communauté juive Sépharade de Montréal (Afrique du Nord, Liban, Égypte, Turquie, etc.) m'élisait le président de l'Association Sépharade Francophone.

Je suis sincèrement heureux de reconnaître que mon élection est due en bonne partie à la Synagogue Reconstructionniste. Mon entrée dans les activités communautaires a suivi naturellement la prise de conscience de mon identité juive. Et je dois cette prise de conscience à la Kehila Reconstructionniste. Chaque samedi, je retrouvais à la synagogue une atmosphère de véritable chaleur humaine et d'amitié.

En aimant les gens qui m'entouraient de leur affection, et notamment le plus affectueux d'entre tous: Lavy Becker, j'ai appris à aimer le Judaïsme. De là à mettre en pratique les principes d'éthique sociale juive, à travers l'engagement communautaire, il n'y avait qu'un tout petit pas qui fut vite franchi.

Cinq ans après, me voilà récipiendaire du Barkoff Leadership Award et président de la communauté Sépharade. Je suis fier de moi, c'est vrai! Mais je suis encore plus fier d'avoir trouvé des amis qui m'ont permis de devenir ce que je suis. Merci à eux.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁸ Vol. 5 No. 2, September 28, 1972. Jean-Claude Lasry, Ph.D. President of the A.S.F. / On March 7, 1972, the members of the Sephardic Jewish Community of Montréal (North Africa, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, etc.) elected me President of the Francophone Sephardic Association.

I am sincerely happy to acknowledge that my election is due in good part to the Reconstructionist Synagogue. My entry into community affairs naturally followed my becoming aware of my Jewish identity. And I owe this

Of the comings and goings in the shul community, perhaps the most frequent were those of Lavy Becker himself, especially after 1968, when he began traveling widely for the World Jewish Congress.

V.2.1.7 Lavy Becker and his travels

Lavy Becker led the way and set the tone in his congregation. It was his love and his organizing thought and energies that were responsible for the community's existence. However, especially following the intense high point of the 1967 dedication of the synagogue building, the Reconstructionist Convention and Expo 67 (see Chapter 6), Becker was often absent. In addition to his travels to small Jewish communities, he and his wife followed in the footsteps of many Montreal Jews, and spent the harshest winter months in Florida. Other members then had to step in and lead the proceedings, doing much to contribute to the shul's do-it-yourself ethic.

Lavy Becker's travels were a rich stream that fed the flow of ideas in the shul community, as Heather Drazner said, "He would bring us the whole Jewish world." The National Archives of Canada includes a volume of World Jewish Congress correspondence covering the years from 1962 to 1975 having to do, in addition to the files on Soviet Jewry, with: Aruba, Barbados, the Caribbean, Central America, the Conference of Jewish Caribbean communities, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, the Dominican Republic, Finland, Haiti, Jamaica, Mexico, the Netherlands Antilles, Peru, Puerto Rico, Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paolo, Spain, St. Thomas,

awareness to the Reconstructionist *Kehila*. Every Saturday, I found at the synagogue an atmosphere of true human warmth and friendship.

In loving the people who surrounded me with their affection, and notably the most affectionate among them: Lavy Becker, I learned to love Judaism. From here to putting into practice the principles of Jewish social ethics by way of community involvement, there was but a small step, quickly taken.

Five years later, I find myself the recipient of the Barkoff Leadership Award and President of the Sephardic Community. I am proud of myself, it's true! But I am prouder still to have found friends who have made it possible for me to become what I am. I thank them.

Surinam, Trinidad, Uruguay and Venezuela! As well, Lavy Becker was engaged in the Jewish issues of the day and kept his congregation informed, very often from first-hand experience.

Among the issues Lavy Becker was involved with and reported on was the plight of the Jews in Russia. The March 8, 1971 (Vol 3. No. 4) Bulletin published a report by the Canadian Jewish Congress based on Becker's visit and that of a colleague. Headed "Report on Recent Visit to Soviet Union", the report begins "Rabbi Lavy M. Becker, immediate past chairman of the National Executive Committee of Congress, and Mr. Boris Levine, president of the Allied Jewish Community Services of Montreal, recently returned from a visit to Moscow, Riga and Leningrad where they met a number of persons." The report goes on to detail the "dismal tones" used by Becker and Levine to describe the situation of Jews in the Soviet Union and to urge all to help by keeping their story in view and by visiting. The same Bulletin reports that Lavy Becker was interviewed on the supertime current affairs television show *Hourglass*, about the trip. A number of people from the Reconstructionist Synagogue would, along with other concerned Montreal Jews, become involved in protests and a smaller number took it further and visited the Soviet Union themselves in order to make contact with Jews there.²⁹⁹

Not all of Lavy Becker's travels were reported in the Bulletin. In an interview with Barry Lazar, Becker talks about his travels generally and then tells how he came to institute a custom which became part of the community's way of doing things. In this telling, the warm connection to Jewish life in all its variety as well as the intellectual honesty so characteristic of Becker come through clearly:

I used to travel for Jewish community life. Whenever I was in a new place, I had new experiences, I used to talk about it. It was interesting to the people. It was how Jews lived. You couldn't have a better broad subject matter.

²⁹⁹ For a nice memoir of one such expedition, with its tensions and sense of meaning, see Miriam Berger's "The Russian People of the Book," in *The Chronicle Review*, July-August, 1975, p. 46-47.

I told them that I was in Milan, in a large synagogue, with a lot of marble; with a lot of mostly Egyptian Jews who had come to live in Italy. I was, I suppose, half dreamy, thinking of many things; I felt a lot of commotion, and youngsters running around the synagogue. It didn't take me long to notice that they were running to join their fathers in the synagogue, from where they had been with their buddies. And they came to him, and each father pulled out his *tallis*, over the head of the youngster, and blessed him, at the time of the threefold priestly blessing. As I was telling the story to the people, who were enjoying it, I suppose because it was about another type of Jew, living in another part of the world, I said to them, 'Now wouldn't that be a kind of interesting thing for us to do here, when we come to it?' And that's how we began putting our *taleisim* around one another in a sign of friendship and warmth. People sometimes react to this as if it were the most important thing in the world, which it isn't. It's a nice idea, but it's not of great importance in terms of philosophy or the understanding of Jewish life, but it becomes the experience from one corner of the world, adopted in another corner of the world.³⁰⁰

Another experimental innovation from Becker's travels in Spain involved bringing Sephardic patterns and practices to the shul, which prayed according to Ashkenazic rituals. It should be remembered that in these years, the Sephardic and Ashkenazic communities in Montreal and elsewhere mixed very little; weddings between the communities tended to be described as "mixed marriages." Here, an introduction to a different way of doing things becomes a learning adventure:

Early one summer circa 1975 Lavy traveled to Spain where, among other projects he hoped to arrange for a memorial program in 1992 to commemorate the 400th year of the expulsion of Jews from that country. [...] On a Shabbat morning in August that year [...] it happened that I got to shul early and found Lavy busily moving chairs and the reading table into the configuration of an old Synagogue he had seen in Spain. This consisted of two parallel rows of chairs facing each other across an open aisle running diagonally back from the *Bimah*, with the reading table at the opposite end of the aisle, all this in a basic Sephardic layout. Then he started to lead us in prayer while seated at one end of the row of chairs. Essentially we were all praying in unison taking turns picking up the lead. The reading table was used only when the Torah was read and then we read from the Cairo Torah, which in itself is a classic example of the Sephardic format. This was indeed another fascinating learning experience with Lavy!

A final anecdote from one of Reuben Brasloff's articles is a reminder that the flow of conversation in Lavy's shul included informal moments. The people in the community came to know one another well over the years, and liked to relax together.

³⁰⁰ Beitel/Lazar Interview, 1969.

One of my favourite [stories] is on the occasion when Lavy was granted the honorary degree of KETER SHEM TOV (the crown of the good name) at our Rabbinical College's convocation in Philadelphia in 1976. [...] A group of us was joining him and Augusta for dinner that evening and since I shared his taste for good Scotch whisky I suggested they join me for a drink before dinner. Eight or ten people ended up in my crowded hotel room for the occasion. They were sitting on chairs, the edge of the bed and even on the window sill while Lavy (seventy something years young at the time) perched himself on top of the highboy dresser, glass in hand and regaled us with some of his fascinatingly humorous stories.³⁰¹

V.2.2 Kaplan and the Eisensteins

The fact that Kaplan was alive, even though in his 80s and 90s, during the period between 1960 and 1976 and that he came to visit, meant that people in the community could witness the depth of his conviction and background and hear his major arguments as part of the flow of ideas in their community. The congregation on the whole was well educated and curious and people read Kaplan's work, some in more depth than others. But the people in the shul community didn't have to read Kaplan to know that there was a philosophical, theological and sociological set of ideas supporting their activities. The proof of this was in the man himself. Kaplan was an exciting speaker, who shared his passion and devotion to truth with his audiences and, as Jack Cohen writes, with his students, where "he had few peers in transmitting [...] an awareness of his dedication to intellectual honesty."³⁰²

Ira Eisenstein and Judith Kaplan Eisenstein visited more frequently than Kaplan did, and their presence also contributed to the quality of life in the Reconstructionist Synagogue. Ira and Judith Eisenstein were an impressive and accomplished couple, setting a high standard of intelligence, creativity and Reconstructionist commitment. Ira was involved with *The Reconstructionist* magazine and was the chief power behind the movement. Judith was a

³⁰¹ "Remembering our Founding Rabbi: Some thoughts on the occasion of the first Yahrzeit of Rabbi Lavy Becker z"l." unpublished article.

³⁰² "Mordecai M. Kaplan." In: *The "Other" New York Intellectuals*, ed. Carole S. Kessner, 291-312. (New York: New York University Press, 1994) 308.

pioneering musicologist, musician, composer and teacher who dedicated her life to Jewish music.

Listening to Ira and Judith Eisenstein perform, perhaps one of the five cantatas that they wrote together, or hearing Ira give a “State of the Union” address about current happenings in the movement, people were exposed to role models of excellence in Reconstructionist life.³⁰³ Their own community provided them with a series of others. These people embodied Reconstructionism, communicating on an immediate level information that Reconstructionist theory could not do. As well, Ira Eisenstein’s relationship with Lavy Becker helped to enhance Becker’s standing in the community. Eisenstein had liked and admired Lavy ever since their first meeting at Jewish summer camp and played a leading role in helping to honour him within the movement.

The January 26, 1970 Bulletin reprinted a letter from Ira Eisenstein to Lavy Becker informing him of a surprise birthday present that his friends at the Reconstructionist Synagogue in Montreal had engineered “behind your back” in honour of Becker’s 65th birthday. They had sent a check for \$1,000 to the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, to be used for the library. The Bulletin tells us that this letter had been read out at services but it was being reprinted because, “it so beautifully expresses our own sentiments about our beloved Rabbi” and therefore “we felt it should be shared with the Synagogue Family!” The letter speaks in eloquent terms of Lavy Becker’s “genius for friendship and for eliciting warmth and affection” and then goes on to express a glowing view of his contribution to Reconstructionism:

We are particularly fortunate and grateful that you have given so large a portion of your gifts of mind and spirit to the Reconstructionist movement. I believe that

³⁰³ Judith Kaplan Eisenstein was responsible for the music at the Friday evening service during the 1967 Reconstructionist Convention in Montreal. Further, in Vol. 4, No. 8 of the Synagogue Bulletin, Shulamis Yelin reports on the Annual Institute hosted by the Brooklyn Reconstructionist Society in Ellenville, N.Y., at which a Cantata was rehearsed and where Ira Eisenstein gave a “State of the Union” report on the movement and college. It is not clear from Yelin’s report whether the Cantata was one written by the Eisensteins.

your role, as leader, organizer, trustee, rabbi, philanthropist, and more, is unrivalled in the ranks of those who have helped make our movement endure and grow.³⁰⁴

The letter is exuberantly signed on behalf, not just of Ira, but also of “Judith, the Kaplans, the Gilberts, and the whole Reconstructionist shebang [together] with your innumerable friends and admirers throughout the world”

* * *

Even though Kaplan did not visit often, the quality of his presence as a teacher and innovator, and as a real human being with a sense of humour, comes across rather clearly thanks to reports in the Bulletin and interview excerpts. One such account is of a visit made on the occasion of the community’s 10th anniversary. The article by Shulamis Yelin appeared in the April, 1970 Bulletin and is entitled “Rabbi Dr. Mordecai Kaplan spends April 3-5 weekend with us.” It begins with affection:

As part of our Tenth Anniversary Celebration, we rejoice to have had as our guest for the April 3-5 weekend, our beloved Rabbi, Philosopher and Founder of the Reconstructionist Movement, Dr. Mordecai Kaplan³⁰⁵

The article continues with a humorous anecdote about “our” 89-year-old “gentle and so delightful teacher” who:

is still – *on ein barab* – a young man, quick witted and light to laughter, his mind teeming with ideas and facts and even fancies that keep his audience open-mouthed with wonder and admiration.³⁰⁶

The Yiddish interjection intended to repel the evil eye is a lovely reminder of the richness of Reconstructionist community life. While the need to keep evil spirits away would definitively not be part of Kaplan’s anti-supernatural world view, or of the official doctrine of any of the denominations, the phrase is at home here as an unquestioned part of the world of Yelin’s youth and of the Yiddish dimension of “Jewish civilization.”

³⁰⁴ Synagogue Bulletin, Vol. 1, No. 10, January 26, 1970.

³⁰⁵ Synagogue Bulletin. Vol. 1 No. 12, April 29, 1970.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

Yelin's article includes an incident that illustrates the particular nature of Kaplan's ability to shock, combined as it was with utter conviction. In this case, he had suddenly become convinced that it was important to call God by His unique name during the *Shema*, perhaps the most famous of all Jewish prayers, rather than using any of the usual formulas that would apply to "any nation's deity." In this passage, we sense Kaplan's belief that most people recite prayers without thinking about their meaning. On this occasion, having had a new thought and what was clearly for him an important insight, he then proceeded to say the Hebrew blessing of joy and gratitude, recited on festivals and to mark joyous occasions and "firsts." In this passage we also witness Kaplan interacting with the community: at first he hesitates to explain himself, since this would take too long but then changes his mind at the urging of the congregation:

[...] when, towards the end of his talk Shabbat morning he shocked some of his audience by voicing aloud the Tetragrammaton, "YAWEH", he said he felt he had to make a *Shebekhiyanu*,³⁰⁷ that it was the first time anyone had questioned the right to speak the unspoken name of God. To explain it would take a thirty-five minute lecture, he stated. When the Congregation applauded (!) he made a simple and moving explanation culminating with the interpretation, once and for all, of the signal call of Israel: SMHA YSRAEL, ADONAY ELOHENU, ADONAY ECHAD" Listen, O Israel, YAWEH is our God, -- None Other -- and YAWEH is unique! For this he felt it was necessary to call him by his true name, not God our Lord or by any other general appellation, applicable to any nation's deity. "What does 'Lord' mean? he asked, 'The name is YAWEH, how else, then, shall we call him?'"³⁰⁸

One can easily see that members of the congregation, brought up to believe that speaking the holy name of God was absolutely forbidden, would have been shocked. At the same time, the force of Kaplan's logic and his sincerity are evident.

Shulamis Yelin's article ends on a loving note, addressing not the larger-than-life, controversial founder of Reconstructionism, but Kaplan the human being:

³⁰⁷ This Hebrew blessing translates: "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has kept us alive and sustained us and brought us to this season."

³⁰⁸ Synagogue Bulletin. Vol. 1 No. 12, April 29, 1970.

His delicious smile and modest manner endeared him once again to all of us. We wish him many, many long and fruitful years in which he may continue to sow the Wisdom and reap the *Nachas* he so bountifully deserves. *Yasher Koach* dear Rabbi Kaplan, and come back to us again soon!³⁰⁹

Another glimpse of Kaplan is conveyed in an anecdote Shulamis Yelin recounted in interview, of a time when she had lunch with Kaplan and the Beckers. Always ready to engage and stimulate Jews in thinking about Jewish life, Kaplan challenged his companions to condense Hillel's already wonderfully terse saying.

He was on his way to Ottawa, and his theme was, the three dicta of Hillel: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me. If I am only for myself, who am I. If not now, when." He was looking for one word for each. We were all so smart, trying to find the words. [...] I had lunch with them when he was on his way back and I said what did you decide? He said it was very easy: "selfhood, peoplehood, action."³¹⁰

The whole community was able to experience Kaplan on his visits to Montreal. A smaller group took up Lavy Becker's invitation and attended the Reconstructionist Conventions that took place over the summer months. For those who went, these meetings were exciting and offered real exposure to Kaplan and Eisenstein and, as the College got underway, to the new thinkers and leaders of the movement. The sixties and early seventies were great times for ideas, for "think tanks" and for believing in the power of new ideas to change things. The combination of Kaplan and his ideas, with the thinking of the new generation who were beginning to study at the College positively fizzed, and made for fun times. Jack and Kay Wolofsky tell of an occasion when Kaplan, then well into his 80s, must have been hearing about the "drug pushers" who had become part of the youth scene but he didn't know what they were. Once he had been informed, it wasn't long before he put the knowledge to work on behalf of Reconstructionism. Kay Wolofsky begins the anecdote, that is finished by Jack:

The highlight of the years, for many years for me was the annual Reconstructionist convention. I looked forward to them so intensely. We used to

³⁰⁹ *Nachas* is Yiddish and has to do pride, pleasure and good feelings, especially from one's children and grandchildren. *Yasher Koach* is Hebrew and means, "May your strength be firm."

³¹⁰ Shulamis Yelin, interview by author, 27 February 1999.

go down, 10 or 12 of us, the Brasloffs, Drazners, us, Lavy and Augusta [...] The word wasn't used in the 60s, but they were think tanks, they were just exquisite think tanks, where you were able to express your opinion and you'd hear marvellous opinions. [...] we would meet with the thinkers of the 60s and 70s. The liturgy, the poetry was coming out at that time. The reference to the resurrection of the dead was removed, reference to chosen-ness was removed ...

There we were at Camp Cejwin, all the students of the time, destined to become the leaders of 20 years later. That was absolutely one of the dynamic experiences of my life. Drugs were rampant but Kaplan was a little naïve about marijuana and those things [...] it was part of the culture of the students and it was on everybody's minds.... I think Jack has told you the pusher story ... [Jack continues the story] I'll never forget when [Kaplan] called out "What's a pusher?" So Arthur Gilbert went up to him and explained. The next day, when a young student asked, "Why is Reconstructionism the best kept secret?" Mordecai Kaplan boomed out, "Now I know what a pusher is!! We have to push Reconstructionism! Now I know what a pusher is!!"³¹¹

The story about the "pusher" shows Kaplan in his public guise, sparkling and engaged with the new generation. Another side of him is shown through his relationship with Lavy Becker, a relationship that clearly meant a lot to Becker, who regarded Kaplan as a father figure.

In the short article, just over one page, that he contributed to *The Reconstructionist* in memory of Kaplan, Lavy Becker mentions fathers three times. First, he reports that in the years after the Synagogue was founded, Kaplan was still his "great teacher" but that "he had also become a kind of a father replacement."³¹² Next, he writes of the ten-year period at the end of his life when Kaplan lived in Jerusalem and Becker would visit at least once a year while in Israel on World Jewish Congress business. In these years, Becker writes, "the relationship had something of the fatherly in it." Finally, Becker closes his article with a vignette of Kaplan in Riverdale, New York, on the occasion of his 100th birthday. "He happily reminisced about his father, who looked down at him from the wall of his room." As he listened to Kaplan, Becker writes, "He seemed still to be in the father role. I felt it." What does this mean? Certainly, that Lavy Becker had been very attached to his own father, whose prayer melodies he perpetuated in his synagogue and also that he felt personally and emotionally attached to Mordecai Kaplan.

³¹¹ Kay and Jack Wolofsky, interviews by author, 27 April and 22 June 2001.

³¹² "The Influence of Mordecai M. Kaplan, z"l: part five.", p. 25.

It is not possible to tell here whether Kaplan looked upon Lavy as a son. What is clear about the relationship from Kaplan's side, is that he became increasingly convinced that Lavy Becker could and should play a leading role in helping Kaplan to realize his dream of reconstituting world Jewry. Becker writes about this in the Reconstructionist article and it also comes across in two letters from Kaplan to Becker, one from 1964 and the other from 1976. A comparison of the two shows both how the relationship had developed, and how unswerving Kaplan remained in his desire to see a new Covenant agreed to by all Jews.

The 1964 letter is typed. It is addressed "Dear Lavy" and signed "Cordially yours." The short letter complements a longer diary entry in which Kaplan writes about the talk he gave in Montreal on March 22, 1964 under the joint auspices of Canadian Jewish Congress, the Labour Zionists and the YM/YWHA. He was met at the airport by Lavy Becker who, Kaplan writes, "has organized a Reconstructionist study group which may develop into a permanent congregation." After first meeting with some 75 members of the shul congregation, during which Kaplan "held forth for almost half an hour" on his conception of God, he addressed a crowded house of over 600 people on "The Reconstitution of the Jewish People." Kaplan was dissatisfied with the event, despite the fact that the lecture was well received and "Those who planned the meeting remarked that had never had such a turnout and so many questions after the lecture." His complaint, recorded in the diary for March 22, 1964, was that he was unhappy with the idea that he should be just lecturing:

I had thought that they expected me to present some plan for Jewish life, which was to be followed by discussion that would terminate in a resolution to take action.³¹³

Kaplan didn't want just to talk, he wanted to act. The project that he most wished to put into action was his dream of arriving at a new Covenant, to be agreed to by all Jews. This

³¹³ From the Kaplan diaries in the Ira and Judith Kaplan Eisenstein Reconstructionist Archives at the Goldyne Savad Library Center, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College Archives, Wyncote, Pennsylvania.

impossible dream, he held fast to all his life. In 1964, Kaplan saw some hope in Lavy Becker's offer of assistance, made over coffee after the lecture, and wrote to Becker to remind him of the promise:

March 25, 1964

Dear Lavy:

I regard the few moments I spent with you in the coffee shop after the lecture the most important part of my mission in Montreal. That mission was not, as I had said, only to impart information concerning Jewish life but it was intended to be a call to action for the reconstitution of the Jewish People.

Your promise, however, to bring up the idea for discussion at subsequent sessions with a view to action more than compensated for my frustration. I am, therefore, enclosing, as I had promised, a copy of the address I delivered last Sunday night.

With kindest regards to you and Mrs. Becker,

Cordially yours,

Mordecai M. Kaplan³¹⁴

The tone in the letter is cordial, the message flattering in its statement that the few moments with Becker overshadowed the rest of the mission in importance. Twelve years later, Kaplan wrote to Becker again, ostensibly to send birthday wishes and thanks. This letter is handwritten, more personal than the first, addressed to both Lavy and his wife and signed "Affectionately," suggesting that the relationship had become closer and more personal over the years.

At 95, Kaplan's sense of mission and urgency were undiminished. Despite the fact that the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, the major movement project, had been established for close to a decade, and that Reconstructionism was finding a place within North American Jewry, Kaplan was by no means content. In this letter, he barely manages to express the niceties required by the situation of Lavy Becker's birthday before launching into what remains foremost in his mind.

³¹⁴Lavy Becker fonds at the National Archives of Canada. MG31H81, Vol. 4, File "Address delivered by Mordecai Kaplan March 25, 1964."

June 15, 1976

Dear Lavy and Augusta Becker,

In the first place, I must ask you, dear Lavy to pardon my delay in congratulating you on your recent celebration of your 70th birthday. A few weeks ago a Jewish judge in Montreal came to see me and I commissioned him to urge you to head the indispensable movement to reconstitute World Jewry as an international people, with the State of Israel as its homeland. May I use this occasion to repeat my plea to you in person. That implies all the good wishes for your health and happiness on your 70th birthday.

And now my heartfelt thanks to both of you for your telegram of congratulations and good wishes on the occasion of my 95th birthday.

Affectionately,

Mordecai M. Kaplan.³¹⁵

Lavy Becker maintains that Kaplan was mistaken in his assessment of Becker's influence. In his article in the *Reconstructionist*, he writes with affection but makes it quite clear that he found Kaplan's scheme quite unrealistic.

My involvement in the work of World Jewish Congress gave him an impression of greater influence than I really had. He therefore pressured me to persuade my colleagues to call a world conference of the Jewish people to write a new constitution. No less. Only the World Jewish Congress could do it, and only I understood what he was projecting. It was a new covenant he was after. I listened, intently. It was such a joy to see him "light up," to feel his excitement.³¹⁶

Mordecai Kaplan and the Eisensteins contributed to the flow of ideas in Lavy's Shul on many levels, strengthening the Reconstructionist character of the community, engaging people's thinking and acting as role models. Different kinds of energies came into play when the shul community relaxed together, creating their very own story out of their memories, their pasts, their present experiences and also their projections about what the future might hold.

³¹⁵ Hillel Becker personal archive.

³¹⁶ "The Influence of Mordecai M. Kaplan, z"l: part five." *The Reconstructionist*. (July-August 1984) 26.

V.2.3 Hanukkah

One example of a community celebration is accessible today thanks to a recording that the congregation made of its 1967 Hanukkah party.³¹⁷ The recording conveys the spirit of fun and creativity in the community. It also offers a rich source of information about the community's sense of itself as part of the larger non-Jewish society. Most of all, it is a snapshot of a transitional moment. It is a kind of conversation of the community with itself, about itself.

The “panel” that forms the centerpiece of the program centered entirely – or almost entirely – on the Yiddish language, at a time when these second generation immigrants were experiencing the success of integration. Their very success, however, would likely have created an underlying apprehension about the prospect of losing what had been their defining language and culture, since they didn't really *need* it any more and were very busy and engaged with their professional lives, lived entirely in English and French. The apprehension is not articulated but may be inferred from an over-abundance of claims in the opposite direction, to the effect that Yiddish is bound to conquer all other languages in Canada!

It is noteworthy that the “panel” is very heavily, but not entirely, composed of Yiddish speakers. A note of diversity is introduced by Jean-Claude Lasry, though it is a rather small note. A substantial balance to the Yiddish panel is, however, present in the first half of the program, devoted to Israeli folk songs and possibly dancing. The balance of the evening, then, is structured to include the two major poles of identity for this group: Yiddish culture and the Hebrew/Israeli reality which would continue to surge in popularity in this post-Six-Day-War victory period.

³¹⁷ The original reel-to-reel tapes from which the citations in this section are drawn now reside in The Ira and Judith Kaplan Eisenstein Reconstructionist Archives at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. The Jewish Public Library Archives has copies on CD-Rom, as does *Dorshai Emet*, the Reconstructionist Synagogue.

The recording begins with a concert, where we hear two men speaking to each other in French and then performing a spirited half hour of favourite songs in Hebrew, together with live Middle-Eastern-style drumming. There is not a sense that people are singing along, but they may be dancing, as some of the songs are those that accompany Israeli folk dances. There may be a little wine or other spirits in the mix, since the singing gets increasingly open and free. It feels like a wonderful time. After the singing stops, the rest of the evening program is devoted to a hilarious “panel” about Yiddish.³¹⁸ Before giving a sense of what the panel was about and what this meant, it is critical to underline the fact that the Yiddish language played an important role in carrying the community’s sense both of memory and of identity. Although not all members of the group spoke Yiddish, for those who did it was still the *mama loshen*, the mother tongue, if not of the members themselves then of their parents. The words and rhythms evoked and embodied the worlds of their childhoods and connected them to their forbears. For the group in the shul community, though, the role of Yiddish in their lives was changing a fact that will be discussed later on in this section.

The Hanukkah party panel begins with Shulamis Yelin, who makes a presentation on “The Ghost of Yiddish Past.” Clearly drawing the line between “us” and “them”, while acknowledging that the line itself is becoming increasingly blurred, she opens by speaking about “this ecumenical world,” where Jews are becoming part of “alle menschen” (“all people”), and “alle menschen” have a ghost of Christmas past, then “I think we should have a ghost of Yiddish past.”

Yelin develops her story about “Ichabus Ferguson,” the Ghost of Yiddish Past, detailing his wanderings from country to country, “adjusting” “*Oy* how I *adjusted* ...” and picking up new

³¹⁸ Since the big event of the year for the congregation had been the dedication of their synagogue home and their hosting of the Reconstructionist Convention, it is likely that this mock panel was a take-off on those proceedings.

words and ideas. It is a story of wandering and survival, a love letter to a language created with intelligence, a knowledge of Jewish history, pride and humour. It is one big inside joke, told with glee to all the people gathered there, affirming their identity and community. Yelin's presentation and the two that follow hers are in English, but are liberally laced with words, phrases and jokes in Yiddish. It is unlikely that the French-speakers who are singing in Hebrew at the beginning of the tape would have understood the Yiddish. Jean-Claude Lasry, who was there and on the "panel" would not have understood, nor if they had been there would the Murads, Sephardim from Egypt who were part of the early community. Perhaps someone translated for them. Perhaps they didn't mind.

The next panellist is Dr. Mordecai Etziony who gets straight to the heart of the matter: never mind all this mixing into non-Jewish culture! At what was then the end of Canada's Centennial year, Etziony looks ahead to how things would really be one hundred years hence:

Enough of this ecumenical concept! [...] We are now going to study what Quebec will be like in 2067 when Yiddish becomes the working language of the province.

Etziony starts his exploration by looking to history. Intensive research that he has just been conducting in Ottawa has showed him that "not Cartier, not Champlain but several Jews, some of them anonymous, were the first settlers in Quebec." As an example, he takes the Quebec City area municipality of Lévis.

Now please remember that Champlain, in his diary of 1629, mentioned that a Jewish *landsman* Lavy, a great, great cousin of our distinguished rabbi [...] landed there [and] named a place in Quebec 'Cap de Lavy,' which subsequently became Lévis.

Other fruits of Etziony's research are the discovery that *Auromke* (Yiddish diminutive of the name Abraham) recited *minche* (evening prayers) before a famous battle, at a place henceforward known as the Plains of Abraham; and that the municipality of Yamachiche owes its name to a Jewish peddler who peddled there on *yom shishi* (Friday, in Hebrew). In similar fashion, Etziony goes on to prove that "English is very definitely nothing but a derivative of

Yiddish,” and then he moves to his own specialty, medicine. He claims to have just returned from an international congress for medical terminology where he had been a delegate of the Canadian Medical Association. At that important gathering, the search was on to find a new common language for medicine.

There were two rival languages there to become the *lingua medica* replacing the obsolete, outdated and outmoded Greek and Latin, namely, Esperanto and Yiddish. Zamenhof,³¹⁹ his ghost that is, withdrew from the contest and he admitted three or four basic things: Yiddish is the senior contender. French and English didn't count because the English and French delegates fought cats and dogs [...] The most important reason [is that] Yiddish has both elements of English and French as its characteristic and is more descriptive and is more picturesque and the more logical. I'll give you just a few examples. ...

More of Etziony's bilingual wordplays follow, and then further proof of the inroads being made by Yiddish in the medical field, this time in the form of an important article just accepted by the Canadian Medical Association Journal. In this passage, as in the whole of Etziony's presentation, we witness the confidence and competence of a Jew who has made it in Canadian society, who knows all the terminology and is personally familiar with the institutions of the medical establishment, but who, at home with the in-group, makes fun of it all by pretending that Yiddish is the truly powerful reality. All this of course, at a time in his life and career, and of those of his fellow shul members, when the very success of their integration threatens the Yiddish language and culture they love and come from. No doubt a twinge of guilt, or at least uncertainty, underlies all the joking:

To prove to you how Yiddish gets priority in the Canadian Medical Association Journal: The editor has accepted my Yiddish article and the revolutionary approach to the treatment of diabetes, obesity and gall bladder disease, contrary to all previous medical precept and practice. This approach is backed by 175 cases in whom the treatment was 99.57 % effective in curing. Here is the recipe, but don't divulge it:

4 latkes the thickness of the palm, fried in chicken *schmalz* [fat], with plenty of *gribbenes* [cracklings; crisp bits of fried poultry skin] to which fine sugar has been

³¹⁹ Dr. L.L. Zamenhof, a Jew from Bialystok, Poland, was the creator of Esperanto, the language that he hoped the whole world would learn to speak and then live in harmony.

added every 3 hours for 8 days. By the grace of God the patient will never have to see a doctor again.

It is an important footnote to this presentation, that despite all the successes evident in the background of Mordecai Etziony's presentation, and the fact that this man was loved and appreciated in the shul community, the pull of Israel was stronger still and he left it all to start anew there, as the Synagogue Bulletin has documented (see above on page 219).

Once Dr. Etziony had finished, the panel turned to Perry Meyer who explored the "implications in the field of law" of Etziony's comments. By contrast with Etziony, who created his material by combining his medical knowledge with his Yiddish culture and language to construct farcical pretences, Meyer based his presentation on his real-life court experience, where he had witnessed unilingual Yiddish speakers having to deal with the system ... or rather, in his anecdotes, the system struggling to respond to the humour and character of these immigrant Jews. Like Etziony, at the very moment when the generation of unilingual Yiddish speakers was giving way to accomplished bilingual, bicultural (Yiddish and English) individuals like those on the panel, people whose children may well not have spoken Yiddish at all, Meyer looked forward to the time when Yiddish would take over:

Yiddish is a real living language in our courts here in the province of Quebec and the day may come soon where Yiddish will be *the* official language of the courts. Some of the judges presently sitting will have to be replaced ... (laughter).

Meyer went on to recount a string of anecdotes from the courtroom, to the delight of an audience that was in stitches. Last on the panel was Jean-Claude Lasry, by then associated with the Université de Montréal and a surprise, in that his background as a Sephardic Jew from Morocco would have included no Yiddish whatsoever. Nonetheless, the panel found a way to make a joke of it.

We have a distinguished delegate [...] from the University of Montreal. What could be more appropriate than having a delegate from the University of Montreal. They say that the University of Montreal is a hotbed of Yiddishists. I

think it's only right that we should hear what these young people have to say. We have one of our own members, Jean-Claude Lasry ...

In the absence of Yiddish, Jean-Claude Lasry's jokes turn to the Reconstructionist Synagogue itself for material. The previous speakers had found the sources of their humour in the "sore point" of the precarious status of Yiddish at their moment in time. Lasry's presentation seeks and finds another sore point: the misunderstanding of Reconstructionism that is prevalent beyond the walls of Lavy's Shul. Pretending that he believes himself to be addressing a meeting of shareholders in the Bell Telephone Company, but then slowly realizing that his secretary has made a mistake, Lasry leads with the most prevalent stereotype amongst Jews who had heard of Kaplan and Reconstructionism, namely, that Reconstructionists are atheists. He goes on to take the reconstruction metaphor literally and then to play on Kaplan's sometimes obscure focus on organic community:

I'll ask the dear shareholders to accept my humble apologies but it's not my fault. It's my secretary. She always gets me into trouble. But don't get me wrong. She's a good girl and she's very efficient too. Tell me, tonight, this is Hanukkah, yes? Then this is the synagogue where they don't believe in God, right? I think they are in the construction business, remodelling old homes into new ones. I think I heard somebody talk of an orgasmic community ...

The 1967 Hanukkah party was a success. People had a great time, singing and dancing, amusing and entertaining each other and at the same time showing off their accomplishments and airing their underlying fears through humour. They deepened their identification with Israel while remaining loyal to Yiddish culture and found a way to avoid excluding the few non-Yiddish members by using a little humour and creativity. Lasry's presentation, however, put its finger on the fact that the Reconstructionists were widely misunderstood. The question of what this misunderstanding was made up of or and what it meant to the community and to Lavy Becker is complex, and will be explored in the next section.

V.3 Reception: “We Were *Treif*”

The question of how Reconstructionism was received in the wider Jewish community in Montreal and through North America, on the one hand, and what this reception meant to Lavy Becker personally and to other community members and movement leaders, on the other, is complex. A variety of questions and answers existed at different levels. As documented above (on page 232), Mordecai Kaplan’s ambition and tenacious desire until the end of his life was to “reconstitute World Jewry as an international people, with the State of Israel as its homeland.” This was in no way a desire to have Reconstructionism take over the world of Jewry. On the contrary, it was a deeply held conviction that the Jews as a people needed specifically, consciously and intentionally to rededicate themselves to a pluralist vision of their past and their future. Ira Eisenstein’s vision was more focused on the American Jewish scene and the role that Reconstructionists could play there as “gadflies” and facilitators. In Montreal, Lavy Becker’s desire was to offer Jews the possibility of fulfillment in his shul and for community members to “demonstrate as a group and in the conduct of their personal lives, the vital relevancy of Judaism for our time and environment.” (see above on page 112) Becker also wanted to help make Canada a place where Jews could live openly and comfortably as Jews and as Canadians, to live “in two civilizations.” At all of these levels, however, there was serious opposition and even hostility to Reconstructionism. Although a detailed account of the issues involved is beyond the scope of this portrait, some sense of what was involved for Lavy Becker and for members of Montreal’s Reconstructionist Synagogue is offered below.³²⁰

Where Lavy Becker was concerned, the boundaries of identity were drawn differently, to include or to exclude him, depending on the context. Within the secular structure that governed the Montreal Jewish community, Becker was a respected member of the core group.

³²⁰ A worthwhile piece of the puzzle is contained in Ira Eisenstein’s address to the Reconstructionist Convention in Montreal, see below on page 273.

He was among the people whose talents and commitment over many years had built and maintained the community and he was recognized as such, among other things by being chosen to head Allied Jewish Community Services (today Federation CJA). Where religious life was concerned, on the other hand, Becker's synagogue experiment met with strong disapproval. For the predominantly Orthodox majority in Montreal, the line was drawn by Jewish law and precedent and Lavy's Shul was on the wrong side of the line. The effects of this disapproval rippled out to envelop the shul community and, as discussed at the end of this section, perhaps to cost Becker the position of President at the Canadian Jewish Congress.

* * *

The phrase "we were *Treij*" was used many times by different people from Lavy's Shul to express the way other Montreal Jews regarded their community. The term is from the Hebrew meaning "torn" and refers to a kosher animal that has been wounded or improperly slaughtered and so is not to be eaten. The meaning is extended to all foods not proper for consumption by Jews according to Jewish law and resonates with the kind of visceral rejection that taboo foods inspire. In a way, "we were *treif*" is simply an accurate description of the way many Orthodox Jews regarded the Reconstructionists, that is, that they were not adequately respecting the provisions of Jewish law and so should be avoided. More than this though, the phrase is rich with resonance, pointing to the in-between position of people who knew very well the meaning and feeling of kosher as opposed to *treif*, who had in many cases stopped observing the dietary laws but who nonetheless still used the vocabulary. What the phrase actually meant to the people who used it, how it resonated within them, is difficult to say. As the material below will illustrate, it seems to have varied.

The attitude of Montreal's Jewish community towards Lavy Becker's experiment was clear from the beginning, when he could not find a place to meet until the progressive/Labour Zionist Jewish People's and Peretz Schools (JPPS) offered him a place.

Lavy Becker's holding our High Holy Day Services in a public school auditorium was not a first choice. [He] had been turned down by two Synagogues. The Synagogue Council of Montreal also blocked our possible use of other venues such as the YMHA. Fortunately JPPS on Van Horne became available for the second year and the four years which followed.³²¹

For the new community however, the excitement of their experiment, the value and importance of what they were doing, were really all that mattered. What other people thought was not a concern. However, once they had become a community, with their own building and the significant successes of 1967 behind them (see next chapter), some people began to notice, and care, although others remained focused on the vision of renewal, "We just went ahead and did what we wanted to do, what was part of the Reconstructionist dream ..."³²² What most people wanted was to see a tolerant pluralism prevail among different kinds of Jewish practice, where meaningful exchanges among points of view could take place. In order to foster such exchange and understanding, the shul changed its initial "keep-to-ourselves" attitude and began inviting people to experience their community.

During the early years of our existence, we kept unobtrusively to ourselves. Because we made no effort to disseminate information, a widespread misconception about Reconstructionism resulted.

Our attitude has since changed. We encourage others to attend our services. Quite a few visitors have been so impressed that they have carried some of our approaches to worship and study back to their own congregations.

In recent years at least two long-established Montreal synagogues have introduced *Kiddush* discussions. We like to think this was the result of our successful pioneering work. In addition we have been receiving numerous requests from Jewish organizations and groups for speakers to explain our movement.³²³

³²¹ Reuben Brasloff, "Our Earliest Days-Part I."

³²² Kay Wolofsky, Interview by author, 22 June 2001.

³²³ "Beginnings, Memories, Bar Mitzvah", 27.

Requests for people to explain the movement led the shul to put together a roster of speakers, “Articulate persons who might be interested in addressing groups on Reconstructionism.” (Vol. 1, No. 5, April 1969) A later Bulletin reports that there had been a number of requests for such presentations but it is not clear how long the roster was maintained.

For some, or even many, liberal Jews, the question of their relationship with Orthodoxy was not an issue. Happy with their identification and their practice, they were aware that Orthodox Jews did things differently and would not have approved of their way, nor did they necessarily approve of the Orthodox way – but this was just how things were and it was not a real concern. Many people in “Lavy’s Shul” on the other hand, had come from Orthodoxy, and so the situation was different. They “spoke the language of Orthodoxy” and wanted to communicate, both simply in human terms and also because they felt they had something worthwhile to share. Two anecdotes told by Jack Wolofsky illustrate. In the first, Wolofsky gets into a friendly tussle with an Orthodox rabbi he knows, about women in the synagogue. Rabbi Shoham is concerned that the legal provisions for women to visit the *mikvah* or ritual bath are not being observed. Jack Wolofsky questions him at every turn, asking “why?” Unlikely as it is that this kind of exchange would ever result in a changing of minds, it is friendly and it *is* an exchange:

The Shaare Zion rabbi came to speak to us.³²⁴ The Temple accepted us.³²⁵ Not the Orthodox, who told us “You call yourself Jews, what kind of Jews are you!” I remember being on a plane once with Rabbi Shoham, whom I was very friendly with.³²⁶ “You know,” he said, “Lavy Becker, he does all kinds of things, gives girls bat mitzvahs.” I said, “Why not! Why shouldn’t women pray with us?” He said, “Well! It’s not our tradition . . .” I said “Why?” He said, “Well, have they been to the *mikvah*?” I said “. . ., perhaps they have taken a shower.” “And when he does a conversion, does he take them to the *mikvah*?” I said, “Yes, I’m sure when he does

³²⁴ Rabbi Maurice Cohen of the Conservative Shaare Zion synagogue. (see above on page 209).

³²⁵ Temple Emanuel Beth-Shalom, the city’s only Reform synagogue.

³²⁶ Rabbi Sidney Shoham of the Orthodox Beth Zion synagogue.

a conversion, he takes them ...³²⁷ “Well—it’s not done under Orthodox supervision!” I said, “Why does it have to be?”³²⁸

Wolofsky’s second story concerns a member of the Lubavitch branch of Hasidic Jews. Once again, the exchange is friendly but in this case friendly relations are not enough to overcome the aversion this man feels to the Reconstructionist practice of Lavy Becker, even though the occasion is one of prayer during the first mourning period, or *shiva*, for Wolofsky’s mother:

A Lubavitcher came into my office. Saw a picture of Kaplan on the wall; he said “Who’s that?” He came in for a donation I said, “That’s Mordecai Kaplan.” He told me, “Jack, you’re such a nice guy, but why can’t you believe in the real thing?” I told him, “For you, Schneerson is the real thing; for me – Kaplan is the real thing!”³²⁹ Prior to that when I was sitting *shiva* for my mother, he came to the house; he came upstairs, we talked. When Lavy came in and started *davening mincha* [saying evening prayers], he got up and walked downstairs because he wouldn’t *daven* with us.³³⁰

For people like Jack Wolofsky, the objective was to open people’s minds and to create a pluralist Judaism. It was not a question of being accepted or approved of. They knew they were being challenged and they relished the prospect of helping Judaism to evolve and adapt:

Manny Bach, Mary Bach. Phyllis Brasloff, Penny Silver, Dr. Etziony We welcomed the challenge; because we knew by being challenged, we could respond to the challenge. We felt we were at the cutting edge of where Judaism was going. We led the way. We had that responsibility. We didn’t care if people objected. We didn’t do it for ourselves; we did it in the sense that Judaism had to change. Had to move into, it was the 20th century at that point. I say we have to move into the 21st century!³³¹

As far as Lavy Becker himself was concerned, he knew that his synagogue was “on the outer edges of religious thought.”³³² He was offering an alternative for those who found it attractive and meaningful. Becker was successful in his life and did not need to please everyone. However, it is possible that his Reconstructionism had something to do with his not achieving one goal that meant a lot to him.

³²⁷ Lavy Becker’s son-in-law Barry Frank confirms that Becker in fact did conversions and that he did take the converts to the *mikvah*. Email communication to the author, August 2, 2006.

³²⁸ Jack Wolofsky, interview by author 1 July 2005.

³²⁹ Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994), leader of the Chabad Lubavitch movement.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

³³¹ *Ibid.*

³³² Beitel/Lazar interview, 1969.

In 1968, Lavy Becker sought to add to a series of successes in public roles and to culminate his many years of work at the Canadian Jewish Congress by running for the presidency of that organization, but this attempt did not succeed. According to Hillel Becker, the sting of failure here really hurt, and the incident should be noted, though the details remain inconclusive.

The usual pattern in the succession of officers at the Canadian Jewish Congress and other Jewish organizations was that the “next in line” would be acclaimed by consensus. Unusually, Becker’s candidacy was contested by Monroe Abbey and he was defeated. The full story of what happened will likely remain unknown. However, JPPS Principal Jacob Zipper’s journal records the event and suggests reasons why Becker’s candidacy was rejected. Zipper’s journal for June 27, 1968 reads:

Yesterday I was at the first meeting convened by Congress to choose a National Council. A large audience was in attendance. Also present and prepared was the group that had publicly agitated for financial support for the schools through the tax system. Even at the Congress assembly in Toronto they had allied themselves with the religious and para-religious to reject the nomination of Lavy Becker for President; and they succeeded. Their justification was that they opposed a rabbi as president. The main reason was that he belonged to the Reconstructionists. The Histadrut people also voted with them on the pretext that Lavy Becker was not pro-Histadrut. Now, the whole Orthodox faction, led by the tax activists, came well prepared and created a tumult.³³³

While insisting on the subjective nature of his own testimony, Hillel Becker confirms what Zipper writes, adding the political/personal dimension that includes the possibility of an “uptown vs. downtown” dynamic. The old Westmount families joined forces with the Orthodox Rabbi Zambrowski to keep Lavy Becker out, on the one hand because he was not part of the uptown establishment and on the other, because his Reconstructionism was objectionable within Orthodox circles:

In some respects the Canadian Jewish Congress was secular, but in other respects, it had among its team of supporters a number of very shul-going people. They

³³³ Mervin Butovsky and Ode Garfinkle. *The Journals of Yaakov Zipper, 1950-1982*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004) 175.

belonged to the majority population. In those days the majority Montréal Jewish population was traditionally oriented, Montréal was traditionally oriented, and the kinds of things that Lavy was doing from a religious point of view were “out there.” People didn’t understand, and therefore were perhaps ready to listen to a right-wing leadership who would suggest that Lavy, because of his religious position, was a dangerous person to have at the helm of the Canadian Jewish Congress. It’s not as if he was running against an Orthodox person, there was no such Orthodox person running.

I would say that between Lavy and Munroe Abbey [who contested the position] there were not philosophical differences. There could possibly be philosophical differences within a Congress environment, but there certainly were not at that time. They were not dissimilar in their attitudes and in their values. It was a popularity contest, not that Lavy wasn’t popular. Lavy was, in a sense, new in town and Munroe Abbey was part of the old Westmount guard; with strong and wide family connections, all the Cummings and all the Reitmans, they’re all *mishpocha* (family). Rabbi Zambrowski, I think he was the Executive Director of Mizrachi of Canada, and he was active in Congress affairs. I guess what I’m telling you is hearsay. I heard from my mother, and maybe from other people too, but I have no experience myself, that Rabbi Zambrowski was opposed to Lavy, and the reason he was opposed to him was because of his religious orientation. Zambrowski basically was a salaried employee of Mizrachi of Canada, he may have had a pulpit as well. He carried a lot of weight, he was well known on the national scene.³³⁴

The fact is that Lavy Becker lost this election, one that his long record of service and success would have suggested he deserved. Although the loss was tough, new horizons opened for Lavy Becker in the wake of his failed bid for the presidency. In 1968, he was sent by Congress as a roving ambassador to Mexico.³³⁵ This was followed by a succession of other trips throughout the Jewish world that engaged his people skills and his practical abilities to make things happen, in a fascinating series of journeys whose story remains to be told.

Overall, Montreal’s Reconstructionist Synagogue met with a mixed reception in the Montreal Jewish community. Those among the majority Orthodox population who knew about it – and most didn’t – tended to disapprove. On the other hand, the people who were part of the congregation loved their shul. Often, they brought their friends along to share the experience of a unique, lively, deeply engaged, Jewish group. The evolved culture of conversation that had

³³⁴ Hillel Becker, interview by author, 22 February 2004; 12 May 2004.

³³⁵ National Archives of Canada. MG 31H81 Vol. 3.

developed yielded all the blessings of community as well as intellectual stimulation, fun, friendship and an important sense of being part of the action in the larger Jewish world and in Canadian society. As well, people were aware that they were part of an exciting Reconstructionist venture whose impressive founders were friends of the community.

The sense of pride that people had in the shul community owed a lot to the events of 1967. The next chapter is devoted to an exploration of the significance of this year for Montreal's Reconstructionist Synagogue and for the larger collectivities it was part of.

Chapter Six

VI 1967: A Watershed Year

The year 1967 resonates with symbolic significance in a series of areas of direct interest to this portrait, its subject and its background context. Thanks to historical coincidence, two of the large polities within which Lavy's Shul was embedded and to which it related, Canada and Israel, each went through critical moments in this year. For Lavy Becker personally, the year represented a high point, during which time he became a spokesman for all of Canada's faiths in the context of his duties as Chairman of the Centennial Interfaith Conference (CIC), duties which raised Becker's public profile. In one symbolic moment that could not fail to delight any Jew from the downtown immigrant community, Becker's duties included greeting Queen Elizabeth II, a moment that was immortalized in a large photograph on the front page of the Sunday New York Times for July 2, 1967 (see Figure 3).

The shul community Becker had founded dedicated its new synagogue home in this year, in an event played out before Mordecai Kaplan and the leaders of the Reconstructionist movement as well as an impressively varied and distinguished audience of dignitaries. For the Reconstructionist movement gathered in Montreal for its 8th Annual Convention, May 1967 made history because of the resolution adopted there to support the founding of a Rabbinical College.

The Reconstructionist Conference in Montreal was held from May 25 to 28, 1967, days during which tensions in the Middle East were building. On May 22, Egypt had closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, an action that would contribute to the outbreak, just two weeks later, of a war that was to have far-reaching effects on the life of the region and on Jewish identities throughout the Diaspora. For historian Jacob Neusner, the 1967 Six-Day War was a symbolic

turning point, inaugurating what he called a new form of Judaism, based on a new narrative that Neusner characterized as “the Judaism of Holocaust and Redemption.” Further, the Six-Day War and its aftermath occasioned moments of truth in the Jewish identities of many young people in the Diaspora and it did so in particular ways for those American youth who had been involved in Civil Rights activities.³³⁶

The ripples of significance emanating from 1967 include other dimensions as well. For the new generation on the verge of becoming young adults, 1967 meant the “Summer of Love,” a search for new ways to be. In an intricate and convincing analysis of the Beatles’ *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* album, Henry W. Sullivan draws the boundary between modern and post-modern in 1967. One of Sullivan’s central points is that the album, both cover art and music, expressed the new generation’s changed relationship to the past, from being in continuity with it to “raiding it.”³³⁷

For many young American men, it was not love but the prospect of being sent off to fight in the war in Vietnam that was foremost in their minds. The exacerbation of the Vietnam War and youth protest against it challenged the Johnson government in this period and the boundaries of identity sharpened between Canada and the United States, as American draft resisters found refuge here.

For Canada, 1967 was a turning point, the year in which Centennial celebrations across the land were designed to enhance “Canadian unity,” in a context where identities were in a state of flux among both the English and the French. Although the celebrations were a success in furthering a sense of Canadian identity in English Canada, they were completely inadequate in

³³⁶ Nathan Glazer, “The Year 1967 and its Meaning”. In: *Judaism in Modern Times: An Introduction and Reader*, ed. Jacob Neusner (Cambridge, Mass. Blackwell Publishers, 1995) 221-226.

³³⁷ “Rock & Roll as Requiem.” In: *The Beatles with Lacan: Rock’n’Roll as Requiem for the Modern Age*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1995) 153-170.

proposing an alternative to René Lévesque's new sovereigntist movement, the *Mouvement souveraineté-association*, launched at a weekend convention, November 18 and 19, 1967.³³⁸ A small segment of those favouring the sovereignty option saw themselves in Marxist terms as part of an international anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist revolution and included the use of violence as a legitimate part of the struggle.³³⁹ In 1970, this group precipitated Quebec's "October Crisis," to which Pierre Trudeau as Canadian Prime Minister responded by imposing the War Measures Act. In 1967, however, the main body of the new and growing sovereigntist movement was alive with a surge of creativity, generating poetry, song and high political ideals. This effervescence became part of the joyful mood that prevailed during the World's Fair that was held in Montreal in the summer of 1967.

Lester Pearson resigned at the end of 1967, to be succeeded by a different kind of prime minister. Pearson's quest for national unity had prompted him to create the Centennial Interfaith Conference in an attempt to reach out across the nation to the grass roots and pull people together. The vision of a kind of civil religion for Canada hung in the air briefly, and Lavy Becker as CIC Chairman was comfortable expressing this vision. Then in 1968, Pierre Trudeau surged to power on a wave of youthful energy and firmly separated Church from State.

All of the foregoing elements coloured the moment in time in which Lavy Becker's shul community was born and developed. A portrait of the community requires a closer look at this year and its significance. It is not, however, the ambition of this chapter to pronounce on the meaning of 1967 in any definitive way. Rather, we will present some of the rich historical detail that is available, having to do with Becker's work with the Centennial Interfaith Conference

³³⁸ CBC archives: http://archives.cbc.ca/IDC-1-74-870-5017/people/rene_levesque/clip4

³³⁹ Source: FLQ: *Un Projet Révolutionnaire*, texts assembled by R. Comeau, D. Cooper, P. Vallières. VLB Éditeur, Montreal 1990 Translated for marxists.org by Mitch Abidor, <http://www.marxists.org/history/canada/quebec/flq/1970/multinational.htm>.

and with the 8th Annual Reconstructionist Convention held in Montreal. This will be followed by a series of reflections on the year 1967 and its meaning in the light of contributions by Jacob Neusner, Nathan Glazer, Robert Bellah and Andrew Kim.

VI.1 “This Great Idea, ‘Canada’”: Lavy Becker and the Canadian Interfaith Conference

In “For Canada’s Sake: The Centennial Celebrations of 1967, State Legitimation and the Restructuring of Canadian Public Life” Gary Miedema writes about the Canadian Interfaith Conference (CIC), of which Lavy Becker was Chair. Miedema characterizes the work of the Conference as part of a “restructuring of Canada’s public symbols and norms” by the government in the late 1960s and 1970s.³⁴⁰ The “great flag debate” had finally been resolved in 1965 when Canada let go of the British-influenced Red Ensign and adopted the Maple Leaf as its standard.³⁴¹ Still, the attachment to Britain remained strong among Quebec’s anglophones and in the rest of Canada, and Anglo-Protestants still dominated Canada’s elites.³⁴² On the other hand, in a post-colonial world, the viability was waning of incorporating British values and institutions as a central part of its identity for the former colony of Canada. Canada’s demographics had changed as well, with the influx of immigrants from Europe after the Second World War adding the category of “other ethnics” to the English and French, at the same time as the aboriginal peoples were objecting with increasing strength to being left out of the Canadian narrative.

In this changing picture, and with the threat of Quebec separation increasing, the Canadian government hoped that “the force of spiritual unity among the Canadian people” might help “To achieve political, social and economic union – the kind of union we hoped to achieve in

³⁴⁰ “For Canada’s Sake: The Centennial Celebrations of 1967, State Legitimation and the Restructuring of Canadian Public Life.” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 34-1 (1999) 139-160.

³⁴¹ The Canadian Red Ensign was replaced by the red and white maple leaf flag on February 15, 1965.

³⁴² See John Porter, *The Vertical Mosaic*, 1967.

1867.”³⁴³ To this end, the Canadian Interfaith Conference was constituted to bring together “nearly all organized religions in Canada” in order to plan common religious events for the nation’s 100th birthday.³⁴⁴

Why was Lavy Becker selected to chair this important Canadian initiative? Most probably because he had amply demonstrated that he had the required skills. As both a rabbi and an accomplished administrator who had in addition developed a sense of Canada through his work on the Jewish Bicentenary (see above on page 103), Lavy Becker was a good choice for the Chairman’s role. Becker recalled being contacted by Saul Hayes, with whom he had worked extensively at the Canadian Jewish Congress:

A Protestant lawyer from Westmount ... went to Saul Hayes, who was Executive Director of the CJC. He went to him as a person of substance, representing the Jewish community and said to him that he thought there ought to be a Jewish dimension, and could he find someone to represent the community at the Interfaith Conference. Saul Hayes called me.³⁴⁵

The desire to include “a Jewish dimension,” and more specifically the committee’s choice of Lavy Becker as chair, may also have arisen from a need to moderate among Christians and to avoid the political problems associated with choosing a member of either one of the old established or one of the newer growing Christian denominations for that role. Of the 34

³⁴³ George Gauthier, representative of the Centennial Commission, cited in Miedema (1999) 146.

³⁴⁴ Nietzsche was translated into English in the 1960s. If God was dead, the Church was in trouble. And it was. Pierre Berton was commissioned by the Anglican Church to find out what was wrong and suggest what to do about it. His influential book “The Comfortable Pew: a Critical Look at Christianity and the Religious Establishment in the New Age” (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart 1965) contains the following statement in a section entitled “The Lukewarm Pulpit,” which resonates with sentiments that would have been familiar to Reconstructionists: “That the sermons of today tend to be spiritless, irrelevant, dull, and badly delivered, there can be little doubt. Almost all the sermons my observer took down in shorthand could have been preached with scarcely a comma changed a century ago. Some ministers may wonder what is so wrong with that since the Christian message is itself eternal. But surely eternal messages ought to be expressed in contemporary idioms and with contemporary techniques if they are to be understood.” p. 100.

³⁴⁵ Lavy Becker, interview by author 16 March 1999.

“member faiths” that were taken to constitute “nearly all the organized religions in Canada” 30 were Christian.³⁴⁶

Whatever the politics behind the choice of Lavy Becker may have been, the CIC got lucky. Gary Miedema writes that Becker “working under considerable pressure” was able, together with executive secretary Eve Gilstorf and several other part-time secretaries, “to create something out of almost nothing.” This was not just another chairmanship for Lavy Becker, this was a golden opportunity to realize his beliefs and values. The Summary Report on the Canadian Interfaith Conference from April of 1967 quotes Chairman Becker in a passage in which we can clearly hear his public voice. Here he projects a humanistic expansiveness that wants to address not only all of Canada but also “the whole world” and to demonstrate the power of interfaith cooperation. In this, he was part of the ecumenical spirit of the times that included the Second Vatican Council with its desire to heal the rifts of the past. Some 40 years after Ira Mackay had confided his view to McGill Principal Arthur Currie that the Jew was “probably the least desirable immigrant to come to this country,” the son of one of these very immigrants was in a position to help define the content of ‘this great idea “Canada,”’:

All seem to recognize the need to demonstrate to all of Canada—indeed, to the whole world—that since we have much in common, we must act in common. There seems to be a need to act in concert in telling the world that our goals are the same, even though our pathways in reaching for perfection may differ by virtue of our various traditions. Whatever may be our thoughts on other-worldliness, we are as one in recognition that this world, this imperfect world, must be made a better one in which to live for all men here in Canada as well as in the various corners of the [...] world. We must therefore find a method, a technique, a project, a series of events, through which to [fulfil the potential of] this great idea “Canada” we have been told “is [on] display.” ... The Centennial gives us an opportunity—and indeed it is a great challenge—to prove [...] that religion is viable, that religion is real, that religion motivates and guides and comforts, that religion is alert to human needs, that, built into each of our faiths is the yearning for a good life not only for our adherents but also for others; that

³⁴⁶ The non-Christians members were: the Buddhist Churches of Canada, Canadian Jewish Congress, Islamic Community, National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Canada. The Zoroastrians and a representative of Canadian Hindus joined late, and were not mentioned in official CIC published material. p. 154-5, Note 12 (a complete list of member faiths is found here as well).

every form of knowledge – scientific, philosophic, – is welcomed by religion, even if it means that some concepts must change, as indeed some have already changed. How to persuade and convince remains a continuing need.³⁴⁷

This passage shows Lavy Becker as an eloquent spokesman for the CIC, whose goals he shared. A Canada aware of the value of “religion” would be a good place for Jews to be Jews, freely and publicly. Becker’s Reconstructionist perspective comes through when he speaks of religion being real and viable and open to “every form of knowledge.” As well, the statement that religion “motivates,” and that it is “alert to human needs” resonates in Kaplanian categories.³⁴⁸ But all of these sentiments were eminently in step with the new understanding of religion in the public place that the government in power was trying to promote. As Gary Miedema argues, the Pearson administration wanted to support a movement already underway to loosen the hold of traditional Anglican and United Christian elites and open the field to new denominations, the Evangelicals and others, in an attempt to be present across the nation at the grassroots level and encourage national unity. The broad Reconstructionist principals of commonality, shared goals and the power of religion to unite, were exactly what the moment called for, and Lavy Becker was able to express them with conviction.

Lavy Becker spoke about finding a vehicle through which to express the “great idea ‘Canada.’” One of the projects the CIC found, and one which Becker was highly involved with, committed to and proud of, was the bilingual *Canadian Centennial Anthology of Prayer* that he

³⁴⁷ “Summary Report On Centennial Inter-Faith Conference National Archives of Canada” MG 31, H81, Vol. 6, File: “Minutes of the Meetings of the Executive”. The source document appears to be a transcription either from shorthand or other notes taken during the meeting or from a recording. It contains errors and gaps, which have been tentatively corrected or filled in here.

³⁴⁸ The reference to differing points of view on thoughts about “other-worldliness” again echoes Kaplan, who disagreed in strong terms with Jews who focused on the world to come; Kaplan insisted nonetheless that there had to be room for all views in a reconstructed Judaism.

edited. This anthology contains a prayer written by Becker that further expresses his own thoughts about Canada and reflects the tensions of the times.³⁴⁹

Centennial Prayer for the Parliament of Canada

O, Lord,
At this moment,
When we begin our deliberations,
When we face strong differences of opinion,
When we are asked to create a balance between conflicting interests,
When government's share in the welfare of our people grows ever stronger,
When we face the deep complications of governing a land and a people, their resources and needs,
When Canada's needs and solutions are interwoven with those of our neighbours, our Commonwealth partners, our U.N. associates, and other small and larger nations,
We ask for understanding and sympathy
For clear vision and sensitivity
For wisdom and selflessness
For strength and courage
That we may succeed in our awesome task
To dignify each one in our land
To give him freedom, right, and opportunity
To enrich his material, cultural and spiritual mode of life
To create unity in the land
For ever and ever
*Amen.*³⁵⁰

Lavy Becker was addressing Canada and the entire world as Chair of the Canadian Interfaith Conference, speaking on behalf of Canada's different religions. He was on the committee as a Jew on behalf of the Canadian Jewish Congress, but Congress was not a religious organization. It was, rather, a "parliament" of Canadian Jewry with, if anything, a secular identity and a political purpose. There were not necessarily any expectations of "Jewish behaviours" associated with his role, and yet it mattered very much to Lavy Becker to be able to live in

³⁴⁹ Note that despite the overwhelming preponderance of Christian denominations on the Committee, and the absence of First Nations representatives, the Anthology contains an exuberant diversity of prayers, with attributions that include: Blackfoot, Mohawk Cree, Eskimo, as well as Muslim, Buddhist, Baha'i, one poem written in Scottish Gaelic and one in Esperanto.

³⁵⁰ Lavy Becker, ed. *Canadian Anthology of Prayer/Recueil de priers du centenaire canadien* (Ottawa: Designed and printed by Mutual Press Limited, 1967) 2.

public as a Jew committed to the fundamentals of traditional practice, to be comfortable maintaining “standards” in two civilizations.

The extent to which it was important to Becker to be able to be clear about his Jewish identity and practice in public is clear from remarks he made within his own community at the Eighth Annual Reconstructionist Convention held in Montreal. The Conference was divided among sessions that addressed issues of “Jews within the Jewish community,” on Day One, and those that considered “The Jew in the General Community” on Day Two. It was in the latter context that Lavy Becker began his remarks with a reflection on the changes that had brought increasing numbers of Jews onto the faculties of Canadian universities and more and more Jewish executives into the corporations. His question to his fellow Reconstructionists was whether the Jews who were taking on visible roles in the general community in increasing numbers were willing or able to “act as Jews” in public and whether the Jewish community was doing enough to support them. This excerpt offers a valuable “backstage” view of how Lavy Becker thought about his public role and also gives a worthwhile synopsis of shifts in the position of Jews in Canadian society. In addition it is a clear statement of how the boundaries of identity were drawn between the Jewish and the “general” community for Lavy Becker and of what he expected of Jews who were newly able to live freely and fully as Jews in Canada:

There has been a change in the position of Jews in the general community in the last few years. Perhaps the best illustration of it is that which has happened at the universities in terms of the faculties. There are now large numbers of Jews who are members of the faculties of the universities. This has I think made possible a certain attitude on the part of Jews to the community, on the campuses and filtering through to the whole society ... I could also for example indicate that there are more and more Jewish executives in corporations than there have ever been in the history of our people in these past 300 years in the United States and 200 years in Canada. I refer to these, and there are other areas, to indicate that we have reached areas of acceptance as individuals that have never been open to us in the past. This is bound to create a set of attitudes on the part of individuals, who have “made it” in a sense, without necessarily having to be Jews. The question then becomes, what is their behaviour pattern when issues arise in which the attitude of a Jew becomes important? Do they behave in such a way so that the

general community, about which we seem to be wanting to talk a little bit today, understands what the position of a Jew happens to be when an issue arises.

I received an invitation to attend a meeting of an organization on which I serve that meets in Ottawa, and the meeting was set for June 15th. I like to go to these meetings, they only take place once in two months, but I took a quick look at my *luach* because I had one in my pocket, being that kind of a Jew, and it is Shavuot and I can't go to the meeting. So I send a simple little note of regret saying it interferes with a Jewish holiday which I will be observing. The question we sometimes have to ask ourselves is how many will go? Or how many will not go and not say why they are not going?

I want to tell you an interesting story of a similar nature, but which makes a point. The Canadian Centennial Commission is made up of 60 people who did all the planning for the Centennial celebrations for Canada, of which Expo is but one. This agency has an annual meeting. The meeting was set in Edmonton, Alberta some time last fall. I was invited though I'm not a member of it to give a report of the work of the interfaith conference. A strike of Air Canada prevented that meeting from taking place. So they set the meeting for some months later and it turned out to be on Pesach, in Quebec city. There are two Jewish members on that Commission, and they went. I didn't go; I wrote a report, I sent the report. I saw some of them afterwards and I asked them, "How did it go?" And they said to me, "You know we were watching so-and-so, who was the mayor of his city in Saskatchewan," the names are not important; the other is a member of the provincial govt in Manitoba. "Some of the *goyim* said 'You know we kept an eye on them to see what would happen but they ate everything.'" This was the reaction of the *goyim* to watching these Jews. Accepted that they were there on Pesach but kept an eye on them and found that they didn't behave as Jews.

These are not a set of outstanding illustrations and I don't know that I want to draw too much from them. But I do leave them as examples in the nature of a text to indicate the position now existing from the sociological point of view. Jews are now in positions where they are accepted more and therefore are in greater contact with the general community as individuals. The question we have to ask ourselves is what have we as a Jewish community done to make it possible for people to have standards?³⁵¹

Lavy Becker's remarks as Chairman of the Interfaith Conference are part of the creation of a more inclusive narrative of Canadian identity, making room for diversity as part of "this great idea 'Canada'". His remarks to the Reconstructionists gathered for Convention aim to ensure that Jews take advantage of the opportunity available to them to live fully "in two civilizations" and not drop their Jewish practice. A different facet of the complex identity picture in Canada can be seen in the Saturday morning service Lavy Becker led on the occasion of the dedication

³⁵¹ This is my transcription from the reel-to-reel tapes of the 8th Annual Reconstructionist Convention. The sound quality for this section of the tape is very poor.

of the Reconstructionist Synagogue on May 28, 1967. Here we see that Becker was equally interested in keeping his own congregation, and also the Americans who came to the Reconstructionist conference, informed about the French Canadian and also of the youth identity issues of the day.

In leading the services, Lavy Becker makes use of the Canadian Interfaith Prayer Anthology that he had edited. He is clearly very proud of the anthology and speaks of how it has been sent across Canada and, through the Canadian embassies, around the world. His choices of excerpts from it include one from page 23, in French. Here he argues for all of Canada coming to appreciate the French language, whether or not they understand the words.

...and I do not mean this as a lesson in another language. I simply assume that all Canadians must, even if they don't understand it, learn to appreciate the rhythm and the roll of the French language. Let's read this one together ...

This lovely poem is then read by Lavy with feeling:

X. Pour un dialogue canadien

Prière de repentir pour n'avoir pas su écouter

Je viens de raccrocher; pourquoi a-t-il téléphoné?
Ah! Oui, Seigneur ... j'y suis.

C'est que j'ai beaucoup parlé et très peu écouté.

Pardon, Seigneur, j'ai dit un monologue et je n'ai pas dialogué.
J'ai imposé mon idée et n'ai pas échangé.
Parce que je n'ai pas écouté, je n'ai rien appris,
Parce que je n'ai pas écouté, je n'ai pas communiqué.

Pardon, Seigneur, car j'étais en communication,
Et maintenant nous sommes coupés.
Pardon Seigneur.

by Michel Quoist³⁵²

³⁵² *Centennial Prayer Anthology*, 23. **For a Canadian Dialogue** / *Prayer to repent for not having known to listen* / I have just hung up; why did he phone? / Yes, Lord ... I am here // Forgive me, Lord, I spoke a monologue and I did not dialogue / I imposed my idea and did not exchange / Because I did not listen, I learned nothing / Because I

The kind of sincerity Lavy Becker demonstrates in wanting non-francophones to appreciate the “rhythm and roll” of the French language and the real feeling he puts into his reading of the poem about listening and dialogue are important details in the portrait of the moment in time when “Lavy’s Shul” flourished. There is nothing about this of the formulaic, “politically correct” inclusion of “something in French” that would become familiar in the years following the 1976 Parti Québécois victory. Although not all Jews or all anglophones would have felt as Lavy Becker did, there is the sense that he expects to be heard, expects to persuade and to teach but not that he expects to encounter hostility.

Lavy Becker then recommends a poem from page 37, “A Canadian Prayer for Young People of all Ages.” It is one of a few poems in the anthology by and for youth and resonates with their concerns, expressed in the lower case “g” and the concern with “phoniness”: “We are not using phoney language because we are not praying to a phoney god.”

It was as Chair of the CIC that Becker attended a service in celebration of Canada’s Centennial on June 30, 1967 at Westminster Abbey in London, and then greeted the Queen when she came to Canada the next day. On the latter occasion, the front page of Sunday New York Times for July 2, 1967 carries a picture: Lavy Becker in the middle, with Queen Elizabeth to his right in front, in profile, shaking hands. The caption reads: “At Interfaith Service in Ottawa: Queen Elizabeth greets Maurice Cardinal Roy of Quebec. Behind him are Lavy N. [the initial should be M.] Becker, Canadian Interfaith Conference head, and Bishop Timotheon. At the left is Prince Phillip” (see Figure 3 on page 350). Here indeed is a “symbolic restructuring,” to use Gary Miedema’s phrase, of the Canadian narrative.³⁵³

did not listen I did not commune // Forgive me, Lord, because I was on the line / And now we are cut off / Forgive me Lord.

³⁵³ In Iris Wagner’s film *The Lovingkindness of Lavy Becker*, Hillel Becker adds a delightful anecdote that shows Lavy having fun with the position he has found himself in. While in Britain for the Westminster Abbey celebration, he

VI.2 Reconstructionist Movement: Convention in Montreal and Dedication of the Montreal Synagogue

VI.2.1 Dedication Day ceremonies

For Lavy Becker to appear on the front page of the Sunday New York Times together with the Queen of England was a coup, a symbolic high point on the trajectory from downtown Jew to participant in shaping “this great idea, Canada.” For Lavy’s Shul, the “frankly experimental operation,” whose first organizational meeting had taken place in a hotel meeting room on June 13th, 1960, a then-undreamed-of high point came over the four and a half days from Thursday evening through Monday, May 25-29, 1967. Over this long weekend, the “do-it-yourself” community played host in great style to the Eighth Annual Conference of Reconstructionist Congregations and Fellowships and dedicated its unique new synagogue home with the help of an impressive slate of dignitaries including then justice minister and soon to be prime minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau; Member of the National Assembly and soon to be Quebec’s first Jewish cabinet minister, Victor Goldbloom; the Mayor of Hampstead, Stuart Finlayson; Col. Dov Sinai, the Consul General of Israel; one Catholic and one United Church Reverend (Rev. Victor Fiddes, Queen Mary United Church and Rev. Michael J. Healy, St. Malachy’s Church); Vice President of the Board of Jewish Ministers Rabbi Bernard Lefell; and Michael Garber, President of the Canadian Jewish Congress. Samuel Bronfman, President of the North American Section of the World Jewish Congress received an urgent telephone call at the opening of the proceedings and so his greetings were read to the assembled gathering in his absence.

met the Queen Mother, and asked if she had any messages for her daughter, whom Lavy would be seeing the next day on Parliament Hill. We do not know what she answered. A further anecdote again shows Lavy Becker’s charm at work. Lavy wanted the Sunday *New York Times* photograph in which he appears with the Queen signed by her and he sent it to Buckingham Palace with his request. He was told that the Queen simply cannot fulfil such requests, as she would never be able to rest if she did. However, in this particular case, she would make an exception.

The tenor of the proceedings over these few days, the excitement, the pride, the underlying tensions and the quality of the organization and execution of the program are accessible thanks to a series of reel-to-reel tapes made at the time by the synagogue.³⁵⁴ Although community members who were there at the time continue to refer with delight to the event, especially to Pierre Trudeau's presence and comments, the tapes fill in a wealth of detail not accessible through people's memories and are of historical value. Additional background information is drawn from three pages from Kaplan's diary.

The taped material demonstrates that Lavy Becker took full advantage of the opportunity afforded by the synagogue dedication ceremonies to articulate his Reconstructionist philosophy and values before a broad audience of what the Conference labelled both the Jewish and the "General" communities. As the highlights presented below illustrate, Becker made his point with the able assistance of shul President Stephen Barber and the invited guests, with a prominent role accorded to the Centennial Prayer Anthology, of which Becker was justifiably proud. In addition, the recordings of the Conference sessions show Becker as a comfortable, witty, attentive and happy host, assisted by Barber, whose cultural sophistication

³⁵⁴The set of six reel-to-reel tapes had been divided. Two were in a box at the Jewish Public Library Archives along with other Reconstructionist Synagogue materials but not catalogued with the other tape recordings in the Archive. The other four had been in storage at the Reconstructionist Synagogue and had gotten lost in the shuffle when the old building was taken down and a new one constructed. Caretaker Bob Buckingham's sharp memory was responsible for bringing them out of hiding. The set is now united and thanks to Hillel Becker and to then-President Bram Friedman and the Board, the recordings have been transferred to CD-ROM, with the originals housed in the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College Archives and copies available at the shul. Thanks are also owed to Eiran Harris, Archivist at the Jewish Public Library Archives for persevering with Tape #3, which the technicians transferring the tapes to CD-ROM had pronounced too noisy to be worth the effort. Harris persevered and determined that it was in fact possible to hear Pierre Trudeau, Kaplan and others on this tape. Hillel Becker then had the tape transferred to CD and enhanced so that this valuable material is now available to researchers.

The tapes were made at the time of the convention. It would seem that they were made by someone in Lavy's shul community. A 7th tape exists, made at the end of 1967, at the Hanukkah party in December (Hanukkah bridged 67-68 that year) using the same technology. The fact that someone in the congregation had the machinery and made these tapes demonstrates the sense of history and occasion that people had. Despite the poor sound quality, these recordings offer valuable access both to the general ambiance and to the actual proceedings.

and longstanding involvement in world Jewish affairs suited him well to greeting visitors and making arrangements for visiting Expo.³⁵⁵

Apart from the reflected glow of Expo and the high level of discussion at the different sessions, the recordings also convey the excitement that prevailed with respect to the major accomplishment of the Conference: the decision to establish a Rabbinical College – as well as the tensions associated with this decision. Finally, the shadow of the war that was to erupt in Israel less than two weeks past the end of the Conference is quietly present, both on Dedication Day and elsewhere through the proceedings.

* * *

Sunday, May 28th, 1967, dedication day, was Lag B'Omer in the Jewish calendar,³⁵⁶ the one day in the period between Passover and Shavuot where festivity is traditional. Despite the fact that it was a Sunday, the program included a short Torah reading, which is traditionally only done on Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays. Lavy Becker explained that the Torah reading, like the other elements on the program, was symbolic. As he did in his work on the Bicentenary of Jews in Canada and on the Interfaith Commission, Becker seems keen here to take advantage of the public relations potential of the occasion, by informing non-Jews about Jewish practice:

May I tell you that everything we're doing today is in the nature of a symbol. It is a service, and yet not a full service. [...] We read the Torah today as a symbol of its importance in the life of the Jew, of the importance of all of its teachings, specific, direct and interpreted ones. And after we've taken the Torahs out and opened the one for the reading, and we symbolize it by calling but one person, I will take the opportunity to tell you why we have chosen the reading that we have today.³⁵⁷

³⁵⁵ See above on page 150.

³⁵⁶ "Lag" (for the Hebrew letters lamed and gimel) represents the number 33 in Hebrew and "omer" was a Biblical unit of measure for grain. Lag B'Omer is the 33rd day of the ritual commanded in the Bible, to count the days between the barley harvest and the wheat harvest.

³⁵⁷ Unless otherwise indicated, citations in this section are from the tape-recorded material of the 1967 Convention.

Lavy Becker is here sharing something of Jewish civilization with the non-Jews present. Later on he will act as a conduit for information flowing in the other direction by making a point of bringing something of Canada's "general community" into his shul through the Canadian Interfaith Declaration, the Centennial Prayer and other Christian and non-denominational readings from his Centennial Prayer Anthology. The one *aliyah*, the one person chosen to ascend to the reading of the Torah, is Jack Kooperstock, "one of our young men" and "another symbol." Further symbolic acts include the unveiling of the name plate reading "The Reconstructionist Synagogue", the ribbon cutting and transfer of key and the affixing of the Mezuzah to the doorpost. Once the rituals and prayers had been performed, the guests were officially welcomed by the shul president.

Stephen Barber began by injecting a note of personal intensity and meaning as he recalled D-Day, 23 years before, which he had spent in an army camp on the English/Scottish border – and compared the first to this second D- (Dedication) Day, equally joyful. He then complemented the personal dimension and carried forward the public relations function begun by Lavy Becker, in this case on behalf of Reconstructionist Judaism, by tracing a broad sweep of Jewish meaning "from Hampstead to Yerushalayim" and explaining the program choices that had deliberately been made to in order to construct a "living illustration," a microcosm of the Reconstructionist worldview. The inclusion of "our rebels" in the chain of Jewish continuity is noteworthy, as Mordecai Kaplan would almost certainly have considered himself a proud member of that group.

Today's assembly, the personalities of our guests of honour, and the positions that they occupy in the religious and civic life of this city and country represents a deliberately chosen microcosm. It is meant to be the living illustration of our Reconstructionist credo, that we are an integral and integrated part of this city, of this province, of this Commonwealth of Canada and at the same time and with the same fervour and dedication we are part and parcel of *Am Israel*. The Jewish people live together in space and in time, from Hampstead to Yerushalayim, from Mordecai Kaplan to our sages, rabbis and rebels of 20 centuries and more.

Hatikvah shnat alpaim, hope kept alive for two millennia. This was more than alive in a song, it is the secret of our survival and of our existence as a living people.³⁵⁸

A series of greetings followed Barber's welcome. Although the dignitaries present could have been forgiven for contenting themselves with polite formulas, it seems that they were touched by the sincerity and sense of purpose in what Becker and Barber had presented and none of the succeeding comments sound at all formulaic.

Victor Goldbloom's remarks were personally felt and intended, since he had had a longstanding connection to Reconstructionism through his wife, who "grew up under the tutelage of Rabbi Kaplan." Ira Eisenstein had also played an important role in the Goldblooms' lives, since Eisenstein married them, as Goldbloom said, "the very fact that I am married at all is due to the good offices of Rabbi Eisenstein." Clearly familiar with Reconstructionism, Goldbloom referred to "the SAJ [Society for the Advancement of Judaism] in New York, which has instituted a question period in the middle of the service" – as Lavy Becker had earlier explained was the practice in his shul.

A sense of warmth and appreciation was also expressed by the president of the Canadian Jewish Congress, Michael Garber, whose familiarity with Reconstructionism may not have equalled Goldbloom's, but whose affection and respect for Lavy Becker are unmistakable:

The Canadian Jewish Congress welcomes the dedication of this synagogue. ... We are supposed to represent all Jews, from the extreme right to the extreme left, but we were a little thin in the middle. This synagogue fills that [gap in the recording]. ... my friend Lavy, after all these years a veteran and a true friend ... Concretely, literally and figuratively: this is a beautiful synagogue. I never believed it would come so soon, but perhaps you have made a special effort to have it coincide with the centennial year, being chairman of the Interfaith Commission and largely responsible for this Prayer Book. [...]

Mordecai M. Kaplan: I thought he was only a person to disagree with! [...] we failed to see the substance, but gradually it became clearer and clearer [and now

³⁵⁸ In the traditional version, *Hatikvah bat shnot alpaim*: these words, meaning two-thousand-year-old hope, are from Israel's national anthem.

Kaplan is being appreciated] in North America and possibly in other countries as well.

Garber's comments on Mordecai Kaplan are interesting. In stating that he had understood Kaplan basically as "only a person to disagree with" he reflects a point of view that was widely shared among religiously-identified Jews who had heard of Kaplan. It is not clear from Garber's remarks to what extent he is simply being polite in his reassessment of Kaplan. Whatever Garber's personal views may have been, however, it would seem that they were not widely shared at the Canadian Jewish Congress. As the previous chapter has suggested, it seems probable that Lavy Becker's Reconstructionism cost him the presidency of Congress in 1968.

The tape recorded material does not reveal the nature of the "very urgent matters of public concern" that had called Sam Bronfman, who was to have spoken on behalf of the World Jewish Congress, away. A first thought would be that it may have had to do with the tense situation in Israel on the eve of the Six-Day War. The perilous situation Israel was in at that moment is stated clearly by Colonel Dov Sinai, Consul General, and apparently just one of the "representatives of the State of Israel" referred to in Barber's introduction:

[We welcome the] representatives of the State of Israel ... Their presence here today is proof that all of the Jewish people is one. Our strength is your strength. Your progress is our comfort and pride. Israel has been and will be the central place of our Jewish life. We shall not forget Yerushalayim. Our house is your house, may you be blessed in your coming in and in your going out. I now invite Col. Dov Sinai, Consul General of Israel to address you.

Sinai begins with good-natured, jovial remarks but then turns to the preoccupation whose urgency he reiterates in forceful terms, demanding that Israel's plight not be dismissed at a time the United Nations was doing nothing and friendly countries were behaving in a manner Sinai must have considered overly cautious. The seriousness of Sinai's comments and his dark evocation of the prelude to the Second World War bring onto centre stage the tension and concern that Jews were feeling intensely at this time. There is a sense that even in the midst of

celebration and of a good life, the Jewish people can never afford not to remain vigilant, alert and active:

[I am experiencing] a kind of déjà vu, I have seen it already before, it has happened in 1938 and 1939 in Europe, when several small countries were gradually more threatened by a godless aggressor and the nations of the world, the great powers said, let us take counsel, let us bide time, let us use the channels of diplomacy, let us not be impatient. This must not happen again! We must remember and we must act upon it. This is what I would suggest as my message today. And this message I should like to conclude with a wish ... That this day we dedicate ourselves ... That this assembly not be a service of dedication, but a dedication of service!

Following the series of greetings by Trudeau, Goldbloom, Garber, Sinai and others, Kaplan gave an address, reprinted in the July 7, 1967 issue of *The Reconstructionist*, entitled "The Functions of a Reconstructionist Synagogue." Stephen Barber's words of introduction communicate the depth of affection and respect harboured in "Lavy's Shul" for the movement's founding thinker, crediting him with "intellectual honesty, disarming sincerity and [a] contagious sense of humour." Beyond this, Barber thanks Kaplan for making it possible for him and others to have the confidence to be "forever tied up with the honest effort of seeking God" and so "to become instruments of the divine." Thanking him for the "gift of his presence," Barber concludes,

I do not possess the words to say how deeply grateful and how happy we are to have him with us this afternoon, to see him before us and to listen to his voice.

Stephen Barber's evident sincerity and the depth of his feeling are noteworthy for the way that they place Kaplan within the unfolding microcosm, the living illustration of a Reconstructionist worldview created for the occasion of Dedication Day. The weight and importance of the political representatives of Quebec, Canada and Israel are very much present and are truly valued, not just for the sake of form. At the same time, it is clear that Mordecai Kaplan has a special role as the aging but still powerful Jewish leader, with a lifetime of committed thought and action behind him, whom Reconstructionists both respect and love.

Kaplan begins his address by stating that he is not the leader of the Reconstructionist movement! He insists, rather that “the actual leader of the Reconstructionist movement is Rabbi Ira Eisenstein.”³⁵⁹

Kaplan develops a line of argument familiar to students of new religious movements, finding the roots of his own thinking in the mythic past. He insists that the real initiators of Reconstructionist thought were the great prophets, citing in particular “the most outspoken,” Jeremiah, who “actually attempted to reconstruct the religious civilization of ancient Israel.” “Moses” he continues “was the founder of that religious civilization, but the prophet Jeremiah was the first conscious and deliberate reconstructor.”³⁶⁰ Kaplan goes on to cite four instances of Jeremiah’s “Reconstructionism” and then to ask, on the basis of this analysis of Reconstructionist principles, what should be the functions of a Reconstructionist synagogue. His answer: study and action! Kaplan concludes in terms that may have surprised any who shared the current stereotype of him as an atheist:

May this synagogue which has taken unto itself the designation “Reconstructionist” fulfill the hopes of its founders in becoming a potent influence for the advancement of Judaism through authentic knowledge of God and His Torah, and the furtherance of all measures for the establishment of universal freedom, justice and peace.

An accident of timing meant that Pierre Elliot Trudeau, Member of Parliament for Mount Royal, who was supposed to have delivered his greetings before Kaplan’s address, arrived late and so spoke after Kaplan, with the benefit of having heard his speech. The brief remarks made by Trudeau, who would be made Justice Minister in the Pearson government at the end

³⁵⁹ This point must have been important to Kaplan since he noted it in his diary for that day: “On the printed program of the Dedication Exercises I was referred to as the Reconstructionist founder and leader. That gave me the opportunity to state in my opening remarks that the Leader of the Reconstructionist Movement was Ira Eisenstein.” Deborah Ann Musher makes this same point in her article “Reconstructionist Judaism in the Mind of Mordecai Kaplan: The Transformation from a Philosophy into a Religious Denomination.” (*American Jewish History*, 86-4) 416.

³⁶⁰ Kaplan’s remarks on tape coincide roughly but not exactly with the version of his talk printed in the *Reconstructionist*.

of that year and who, less than a year hence, would be Prime Minister of Canada, are important:

[...] [How happy I am] to be at the birth of something like your synagogue, the first in Hampstead and the first Reconstructionist congregation in Canada. [I] feel at home here when [Victor Goldbloom] mentioned the Reconstructionist ideas -- that most of us are trying to [implement] in society. [I felt very much at home] when I heard the words of Rabbi Kaplan, [about] education [And so, altogether] I feel that if I were allowed to be a Reconstructionist without converting to Judaism, I would do it!

Certainly the things I heard Rabbi Kaplan say, [apply] not only [to] religious society but [to the] civil society to which I would hope to belong. As a member of a different faith than yours, the Catholic faith, I must say that I have always taken a Reconstructionist approach. And for these reasons I am not only honoured to greet you in the name of the government of Canada and to wish you well, but I also want [to add] my own personal [expression of good wishes]. Thank you very much.³⁶¹

Pierre Trudeau's remarks can be seen, I believe, to mark a watershed in Canadian identity. The vision of the Pearson government had been one in which religion would renew its role in Canadian life, where a re-invigorated Church with a few other faiths surrounding it, would bring the country together and achieve national unity, while drawing people back into the places of worship and community they had been deserting over the past decades. Trudeau's vision was different. The State should intrude neither within the bedrooms nor the chapels of the nation. His civil society was in harmony with Kaplan's two-civilization vision: Jews, Christians or others should fully embrace what was meaningful to them within their own communities and at the same time participate whole-heartedly and fully in the civil society of Canada.³⁶²

³⁶¹ This is an approximate transcription. The tape I was working with, Tape #3, was very difficult to hear.

³⁶² Although it would take a lengthier exploration to test and do it justice, it is interesting to speculate that the Reconstructionist vision appeared equally at home on either side of the Pearson/Trudeau divide, finding a role both within Pearson's "civil religion" model and in Trudeau's civil society. In the case of the Pearson vision, Jews would have had an acknowledged role as a religious group alongside other such groups and would have had equal recognition with them despite being a minority: this was a vision that Kaplan would have been happy with and indeed that he argued for (see discussion of Catholicism in JAC, pp. 76-79). At the same time, the Reconstructionist vision would have included a commitment to full participation in Canadian culture and society; the freedom to take control of religious practice in the private realm would then be taken advantage of to the

The presentations close with Stephen Barber surprising Lavy Becker by giving him a gift. Barber's remarks refer to the new synagogue, "which in reality should be called the house that Lavy built," saying that "nothing has been too big, or too small and unimportant" for Becker to involve himself with. Despite Becker's "rather unsentimental approach," Barber underlines "how much it means to Lavy and to all of us" and the importance of this interfaith dedication ceremony to "the entire population of Montreal and of Canada." Barber then presents Becker "as a token" with a drawing whose significance he presents in ringing terms:

[This picture is of] the oldest synagogue in Europe, [in] Prague, celebrating its 700 years of uninterrupted [life]; [it was] made in 1945 by one of the surviving artists of the Nazi concentration camps [and] will adorn your study. [In this way,] the old and the old and the new have been welded together, conscious of its legacy [and of] living Judaism as a force [to benefit the Jewish people and] the whole of mankind.

Perhaps Lavy Becker thought of the handwritten "synagogue vignettes" he kept among his notes; not usually at a loss for words, his response to receiving this gift was to admit that he was tongue-tied:

I must admit ... I hardly know what to say ...

* * *

The dedication ceremony brought to a close the serious business of the Conference; it was followed on Monday by an organized visit to Expo. The previous three days had been full and rich. Delegates had enjoyed creative services led by Rabbi Emanuel Goldsmith on the Friday evening and by Lavy Becker on the Saturday. They had been stimulated by panels and presentations on a list of topics having to do with contemporary Jewish identity. These included mixed marriages and the question of how the "Who is a Jew" issue was being dealt with by the Reform and Conservative movements. The Conference's main topics had to do

fullest, with satisfaction depending on the amount of control the civil society would actually give religious groups over their own affairs.

with “The Jew in the Jewish Community” and “The Jew in the General Community,” the two critical dimensions of the goal of “living in two civilizations.” As well, Kaplan’s central preoccupation with polity was aired through discussions of the “Organic Jewish Community.” Delegates got an overview of the state of their Reconstructionist movement from Ira Eisenstein—who pronounced it healthy and growing, but was concerned about its reception in the Orthodox world. Grappling with ideas was balanced by a wrestling with practicalities, finances and, most important, the question of a training college for rabbis and how to fund it. Finally, Israel as a preoccupation and central concern emerges as a motif over the days of the Conference and in the Resolutions adopted at the end.

All of this material offers a valuable insight into the character of Reconstructionism in 1967 and the themes with which the movement was preoccupied. From the Canadian perspective, it is interesting to note the confusion that arose, as noted below (on page 270) in the categorization of “American” – did this include Canadians, or not?

VI.2.2 The Reconstructionist Movement Convention

The tape recordings from the 1967 Reconstructionist Convention in Montreal express the movement’s hopes and successes as well as its difficulties. The goal was to bring all Jews together within Kaplan’s encompassing narrative of peoplehood. Ira Eisenstein’s speech as reported below details both successes in this area, and disappointments.

Montreal lawyer and later judge Perry Meyer offered a keynote speech on the topic of “organic community.” Although it was judged “brilliant” by *The Reconstructionist* magazine, Kaplan’s notes to his diary reveal that he was not impressed. Kaplan’s private thoughts notwithstanding, Meyer’s speech did demonstrate a brilliant mastery of large quantities of material; as well, his comments on Canada and Quebec, as reported below, offer further evidence of a spirit of openness that still existed in 1967.

From the perspective of turning points in Reconstructionist history, the critical moment of the Convention came with the discussions surrounding the decision to support the idea of a Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, discussions which are in part summarized in the material that follows.

Finally, the 1967 Reconstructionist Convention was marked by the intensity – exhilaration on one hand and dread on the other – present at the heart of two identities important to the life of Montreal Jews: Canada and Israel.

VI.2.2.1 Ira Eisenstein on Reconstructionism and the Jewish Community

Ira Eisenstein's presentation on "Reconstructionism and the Jewish Community" offers a contemporary analysis of the challenges facing the movement as well as of its growing strength and role among American Jews, at a time when it was "operating or hoping to operate fully on the denominational level and on the ecumenical level."

Eisenstein introduced his subject by saying what he would *not* be talking about. He would not deal with the construction of the organic Jewish community, nor with what was being done to bring about the organization of a new structure for American Jewry. In an aside that will resonate sharply in the ears of those concerned with relationships between Canadian and American identities, he then clarified the term "American":

... by which I mean the United States. It's a little difficult to make a distinction here between the United States and Canada. Let's say that for the duration of this conference, Canada isn't in America.

Eisenstein continued, in the tone of ease and confidence characteristic of all or almost all of the Conference hosts and keynote speakers, commenting in a spirit of fun on the fact that this was the best-attended of all Reconstructionist Conventions to date:

I don't know if this is an indication of growth in the movement, or as Lavy so subtly suggested somehow related to the fact that there is an Expo ... but this is

the largest opening night crowd we have ever had. Next year we are going to test this by having our conference at some obscure and isolated and culturally deprived community: we are going to be in Los Angeles.

The central focus of Eisenstein's presentation had to do with how he saw Reconstructionists working to facilitate thinking about polity and structure among American Jewry. He was troubled that the American Jewish community did not yet realize how critical it was to focus on issues of organization. The then current *ad hoc* arrangements were not good enough. Eisenstein admitted that the Reconstructionists were not then in a position to do any more than,

to advocate and to preach and to propagandize and to urge and to cajole our fellow Jews with regard to the whole concept of the organic Jewish community

Nonetheless, he was very happy to report some progress. He reminded his listeners of the conference that had taken place the previous year in White Plains, New York, at which time he had just received a grant from the Merrill Trust for the purpose of bringing Jewish leaders together to face common problems. That gathering had led to a meeting of the executives of national Jewish organizations concerned with the problems of "holding college youth," and of recruiting professional Jewish personnel. Eisenstein reported with pride that among the 30 carefully selected people invited, the response had been "extraordinary." In some cases, people who would not normally have been keen to come to such a gathering had accepted the Reconstructionists' invitation. Among those who came were the Executive Directors, "for example of the American Jewish Committee, represented [...] at the first meeting but there in person at subsequent meetings, the American Jewish Congress, the American Association for Jewish Education, Zionist Organization of America, Hadassah, Labour Zionist Organization, B'nai Brith, and so on." Eisenstein hypothesized as to why these people agreed to come to his meeting, where they might not otherwise have been inclined to attend. He suggested two possible reasons. First, that they would not have been afraid of a Reconstructionist "imperialistic plot" or "power grab." The second reason, Eisenstein suggested, might have had

to do with the confidence inspired in the Jewish leaders by the leadership of the Reconstructionist movement and the integrity of its goals:

I think that the way they feel about Dr. Kaplan, has somehow been transferred to some of his disciples; and therefore they are not suspicious of our motives and they know that what we do is for benefit of *klal Israel*.

Although Eisenstein was clearly pleased with what had been accomplished at the meeting of community leaders, he pointed to a problem that would continue to obstruct collaboration among American Jews. The worry that Eisenstein communicated to his fellow Reconstructionists had to do with the Orthodox community who, he said, “are determined not to recognize us.” To illustrate, he told the story of how he had applied to join the Conference of the Presidents of Major National Jewish Organizations but was met with delays:

... that membership application was referred to the membership committee, it was delayed, it was postponed, it was referred back to the plenum; there was another discussion, they referred it back to another committee. As I tried to get reports on what was happening to us, I finally ferreted out what was happening.

On the positive side of the ledger, a number of Jewish leaders had apparently argued that it was time to recognize the Reconstructionists as a major national Jewish organization, “not so much in terms of our total membership, which is not large [...] but in terms of the major impact which the Reconstructionist movement has made and is making on American Jewish life.” However, the representative of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America and representatives of the Rabbinical Council of America, representing the Orthodox rabbis, had objected. Their reason was that admitting the Reconstructionists to the Conference of Presidents would give them recognition and, “We don’t want to legitimize their existence.”

For Ira Eisenstein, this was of course a disappointment. He was, however, somewhat comforted by the fact that these same Orthodox bodies were equally unhappy with the other liberal movements.

So now we know. We knew before but we had a kind of wishful hope that this idea of diversity within Jewish life would have been taken seriously. What happened subsequently softens the blow somewhat, because it is not only we whom they don't like. They don't like the Conservatives or Reform either and they certainly don't want to enter into dialogue with non-Jews under the auspices of the Synagogue Council of America.

Eisenstein saw the absence of Orthodoxy from several of the meetings he had called, "though they did come to some," as an impediment to unified action. However, he was pleased to report that Reconstructionism was being recognized increasingly, among other things for its publications. *The Reconstructionist* especially, though not in "the category of Playboy or Look or Life" was having an impact across the spectrum of Jewish life in America. That this kind of cross-denominational impact was an important part of the Reconstructionist identity is clear, and was what Eisenstein referred to as the "ecumenical" work of the movement. As the previous chapter has illustrated, the question of the relationship with Orthodoxy persisted in the movement as well as in "Lavy's Shul," where "the Orthodox" continued to be a category, a kind of boundary delimiter between "us" and "not-us." Especially for people who themselves had come from Orthodox milieus or who retained ties with them, "the Orthodox" were referred to with a sense of superiority, or with a hint of envy or, in rare cases, as an interesting category of fellow-Jews to be communicated with (see Reuben Brasloff's testimony on page 132).

Eisenstein notes further that Reconstructionism was being cited increasingly in studies on contemporary Judaism. It is significant that, at this critical stage in the evolution of Reconstructionism from school of thought into denomination, Ira Eisenstein makes a clear statement to the effect that Reconstructionism is *not* a denomination analogous to the others, but rather represents a category of its own, "*sui generis*." Speaking about the researchers who had begun to include Reconstructionism in their observations of American Jewish life, he comments that "they don't know quite where to put us," but that they generally "designate us

as a fourth group with the Reform and Conservative” and this, “whether we ask for it or not.”

He continues:

We don't belong in that category, any more, I believe, than Jews belong in the category of Catholic, Protestant and Jew. We are *sui generis* in relation to other groupings, *sui generis*, I mean as Jews, and we are *sui generis* as Reconstructionists in relation to other Jewish groups.

The point is important because it suggests that it may be useful not to conflate a separate *organizational structure* for Reconstructionism, which Eisenstein was clearly in favour of, with the constitution of Reconstructionism as a *denomination*, which it is not clear, at least in this passage, that he favoured, or certainly not to the exclusion of other roles and functions. He made a point of repeating his comment made at the White Plains meeting the previous year, that Reconstructionists were “operating or hoping to operate fully on the denominational level *and* on the ecumenical level.”

It is clear that Eisenstein is pleased to be noticed, and especially pleased to be noticed as distinct from the Conservative movement:

[...] they no longer pass us by. They no longer ignore us and thank goodness, they no longer simply label us as “the left wing of the Conservative movement.” Thank Goodness. At least since Dr. Kaplan retired from teaching at the Seminary they finally got it into their heads that we are an independent group.

Altogether, Eisenstein's message is positive, in tone and in content. His parting remarks confirm the snapshot of a movement feeling itself to be self-aware, confident and growing:

I have left out many things, but I have tried to give you at least some general feeling about the way we are moving out into the community, achieving recognition in some quarters, still failing to achieve recognition in other quarters, but on the whole, moving ahead and I think that tonight's attendance, and the response that we have had from you, Expo or no Expo, the fact that we have more communities represented here tonight than we have ever had at any previous conference, all of this testifies to the fact that we are healthy and growing and we look forward to the future with ever-increasing confidence.

VI.2.2.2 Perry Meyer on Organic Community

Listed among the highlights of the Conference published in the July 7, 1967 issue of *The Reconstructionist* is Perry Meyer's "brilliant analysis of the whole concept of the organic community." As much a core element of Reconstructionism as the organic community may have been, however, it seems that there was not universal clarity as to what exactly it was. Meyer's opening remarks refer rather ruefully to his expectation that Ira Eisenstein would have got the ball rolling:

I don't know exactly where to start. I had thought that perhaps Dr. Eisenstein was going to talk a little bit about the organic community himself in general terms, but he passed the buck to me and I can't very well say that he was supposed to, or I thought he was going to ...

Meyer avoids committing himself to what the Reconstructionist movement should do about implementing organic community by focusing instead on the conceptual dimension:

I'm not going to talk about Reconstructionism at all, or what this movement can do about establishing an organic community. What I'm going to try to do is make some introductory remarks about the organic community concept.

The bulk of Meyer's presentation was a detailed and informative historical analysis of the functions and functioning of the Canadian Jewish Congress from its inception till the current moment. However, nothing if not a stickler, Kaplan was not impressed, as he confided to his diary:

Thursday night, Professor Perry Meyer, Professor of Law at McGill University and a member of the Superior Council of Education of the Province of Quebec spoke on "Toward the Emerging Organic Community." His point was that the Canadian Jewish Congress, which was expected to bring about the Organic Community, was prevented from doing so because of the competing interests of the delegates to that Congress from the various Jewish agencies and institutions.

I was shocked by the misconception that an organic community could ever come about in that way. At the session on Friday morning I pointed out that an organic community is prior to the agencies and institutions. To expect delegates of already existing institutions to compose an organic community is like expecting a *golem* to constitute a live human being.³⁶³

³⁶³ Kaplan Diary, for June 7, 1967. Ira and Judith Kaplan Eisenstein Reconstructionist Archives at the Goldyne Savad Library Center, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College Archives, Wyncote, Pennsylvania.

Despite Kaplan's objections, one may speculate that the "organic community" was a successful organizing concept in part because, like other organizing metaphors, it was flexible enough to inspire many people, who had quite different notions of what it meant.

Perry Meyer's discussion of the Canadian Jewish Congress includes a series of comments about the differences between the Jewish polities in Canada and the United States. Some people held the view that Canadian Jewry was much more flexibly and "organically" organized than American. Meyer makes the point that the Canadian reality is different from that of the United States:

While you may think we are further along the path ... I don't think our patterns, our successes and failures can necessarily be a guide for the US, I think our problems are different... the kind we have in Canada may be very different from what you need in America, which may be very different from the kind that Israel needs or that world Jewry needs. We're very much smaller than you are. Our society is less complex although it is getting more complex. That is one of the reasons why our old organic community isn't working as well as it was.

Although one of his central arguments is that responsive, representative, decentralized government becomes increasingly difficult as communities become larger and more complex, Meyer is positive about Canadian ecumenism, and mentions the pioneering work of Rabbi David Hartman in Montreal:³⁶⁴ By contrast with the positive value he sees in Jewish ecumenism, Meyer points to the dangers of Jewish isolationism. In terms that reflect an empathy with French Canadian realities, he makes his point by introducing a comparison between French Canadian and Jewish communal patterns. Having just finished a detailed

³⁶⁴ Born in Brooklyn in 1931 and ordained at Yeshiva University in New York, Rabbi Hartman became the influential Rabbi of Congregation Tiferet Beit David Jerusalem in Montreal. He moved to Israel in 1971 where he continued his work towards pluralism in Jewish life through the Shalom Hartman Institute, which he founded in Jerusalem.

Meyer's comment: The situation as far as Jewish ecumenism in Canada is concerned may be a little better than it is in the US [...] I picked up a clipping from the New York Times describing an ecumenical movement begun in Canada, started by an Orthodox rabbi in Montreal, Rabbi Hartman, and I think this is the first step along the lines that Rabbi Eisenstein indicated, of an attempt to bring the rabbis together from the Orthodox, Conservative and Reform camps and it wouldn't surprise me if – I didn't check the list but it wouldn't surprise me, if there were some Reconstructionist rabbis there as well. The important thing is that if an ecumenical movement can begin in the Orthodox camp then I think it stands a good chance of success.

exposition of the evolving status of the ever-absorbing issue of Jewish schools in the Province of Quebec,³⁶⁵ Meyer concludes that the major danger in this as in other areas of Jewish communal life is “separatism” as opposed to ecumenism:

[The problem is] Jewish separatism, a word which is very well known in Quebec these days.

Meyer continues, sharing comparative cultural politics with an audience, many of whom would have been unfamiliar with the dynamics of life in Quebec. The fact that Meyer is comfortable drawing parallels between Jews and French Canadians, indeed that doing so seems to carry with it a sense of cultural sophistication, is noteworthy.³⁶⁶ Several months after the Conference ended, René Levesque would leave the Quebec liberals, initiating a development that would see separatism evolve from a minority position to a central plank in the Parti Québécois, a development that would polarize anglophones and francophones and make many Jews uncomfortable enough to leave the province.

By the way, the French Canadians have started an organization which claims to be an organic community also. There is, in connection with the proposed modifications of the Canadian constitution, something called Les États Généraux, the Estates General, in which they are trying to elect delegates from various organizations in order to create a constituent assembly which would define the goals and objectives of French Canada. But it's not proving to be much of a success. They're having as many *tzuris* as we have, because some of their major organizations have boycotted it as well. But in any event, the idea of organic community is not something which is only a Jewish problem. French Canada in a sense considers itself to be an evolving organic civilization as well and wants to find some structural way of achieving its rights, possibly within constitutional reform.

Some of them are separatists and want to cut themselves off from the rest of Canada. [They represent] only a minority at the present time, but it's still there.

³⁶⁵ On this subject see Arlette Corcos, *Montréal, les Juifs et l'école*. Sillery: Les éditions du Septentrion, 1997, also Gerald Tulchinsky's treatment of the issues in *Branching Out: the Transformation of the Canadian Jewish Community* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1998).

³⁶⁶ Tulchinsky makes the following comment, mentioning the Cercle Juif de la Langue Française but not the Cercle du roi David or Les Amitiés Culturelles Canada-Israel, both of which shul President Stephen Barber was involved in: “At this time, the Jewish community began to pro-actively reach out to francophone clerical and intellectual leaders. Led by Saul Hayes and David Rome, Quebec Jewry reactivated their public-relations committee and established the Cercle Juif de la Langue Française to demonstrate to French Canadians that Jews were not ‘on the side of the English’ in Quebec. In fact, a segment of Montreal Jewish intellectuals was genuinely interested in French culture and in establishing a dialogue in French with like-minded Québécois.” *Branching Out*, 273.

Well we [...] have our Jewish separatists [...], who also want a monolithic position in the Jewish community and want to cut us off from others to a certain extent and from our duties as citizens.

VI.2.2.3 A College for training rabbis

The opening ceremonies and keynote addresses on Thursday night were followed by a varied program including panel discussions, workshops and creative services, with Friday night music provided by Judith Kaplan Eisenstein.

Sunday was designated for business meetings, and the most serious business of the conference had to do with the issue of a training college for Reconstructionist rabbis and other professionals. The fourth of seven resolutions that came out of the Conference, reads:

Whereas the future of the Reconstructionist movement will be strengthened by the availability of rabbis and teachers properly educated and trained and imbued with the spirit of Reconstructionist philosophy, be it RESOLVED that the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Fellowships recommends to the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation the establishment of a school for the training of rabbis and teachers, with a fund of \$1,000,000 to be established as quickly as possible to launch this project, and that a working fund be established to acquire a structure which shall serve as a center for the school and for the movement as a whole, and it pledges its support for the raising of the said funds and the establishment of the school in their respective local communities.³⁶⁷

Resolution number five follows by urging affiliated congregations and *havrutot* “to attend meetings of the Board of the Foundation when the above matter will be discussed.”

The decision to support the project of a training college represented a turning point in the movement. However, while the general view of Reconstructionist history has been that Ira Eisenstein was the one pushing for the institutionalization that alone, in his view, could ensure the ongoing survival of Reconstructionism, meeting recordings and Kaplan’s diary confirm

³⁶⁷ Resolutions 1 and 2 offer votes of thanks to Barber and Becker, respectively. Number 3 is a statement of solidarity with Israel and a call for support from the governments of the USA and Canada. 6 and 7 have to do with implementing past resolutions and sharing qualified rabbis and spiritual leaders with affiliates in need, “in a spirit of fraternal cooperation” and to make arrangements for an equitable participation in the expenses of the above scheme.

what Rabbi Emanuel Goldsmith has maintained, that Eisenstein was not at all pleased with the decision when it was first taken.

A preliminary examination of the recordings of the business meetings reveals a series of intense and lively exchanges about the idea of a College and lengthy debates about the optimal fundraising strategy. Reel IV opens with a meeting whose date and time are not specified.³⁶⁸

The speaker refers to Ira Eisenstein, who is not at that moment in the room, apparently confident that he is part of the important proposition being put forward:

It makes me very happy to see the feeling of the group here that represents the Federation of Fellowships and Congregations. As a matter of fact, as another Board member here, Abe Goodman will testify, the Foundation is on record and needs no further resolution except perhaps a resolution [mandating?] the Federation to proceed as quickly as possible to facilitate the erection or the raising of funds with the purpose of erecting a Rabbinical school. We have already raised, with a handful of members, over \$100,000.

Now unfortunately, Ira isn't here, but I'm sure that when he does return, either at this session or at some later session, if we ask him what the situation is, he will perhaps report in more detailed fashion. I know he has been working with Brandeis University; he has been working with colleges who have students under the Judaica Studies who are interested in getting their PhDs. And he thought that there was an opportunity to make use of these channels to create lay leadership or rabbinical leadership – he wanted to take advantage of that opportunity. Simply this, that we are not asleep, but I think this impetus that we're getting here will perhaps, when brought back to the Foundation, will excite it to greater activity and greater motion. Therefore, I would suggest that a resolution be offered to the Foundation, that in the opinion of the Federation, we feel that we must have a Rabbinical school and we urge that the Foundation proceed with such dispatch and speed that it becomes a realization in the very near future.

As it turned out, when Ira Eisenstein did return, far from being pleased to fill in details, he was angry and “deeply resentful” at what had been done in his absence, as Kaplan wrote in his diary:

The most important item of the Conference, which was next discussed that morning was the problem of training rabbis and teachers for the Reconstructionist movement. Rabbi Abraham Winokour of Pacific Palisades,

³⁶⁸ Kaplan writes that the discussion “was suspended for an informal discussion Saturday afternoon” and then taken up again on Sunday, suggesting that the meeting in question took place Friday afternoon, when the program lists the Women's Organization as meeting.

California, passionately argued that without a school to train Reconstructionist spiritual leaders for the movement, the latter would disappear with my passing. He was followed by others who reinforced his arguments. I myself was so stirred by their pleas for the establishment of such a school, and recalling the meeting which had taken place at a Jewish restaurant in Midtown last December, and which had been attended by a number of rabbis together with Abe Goodman, Leopold [Sneider?] and Sidney Musher, when Ira presented the plan of such a training school, I spoke up. I said that if we could be assured by those present that a million dollar fund could be raised assuring an income of \$50,000 annually, I would undertake to organize such a school with the help of Ira Eisenstein, Emanuel Goldsmith and Alan Miller.

Ira Eisenstein was not in the room while the forgoing debate took place because he had been called away by the Women's Group which had been meeting in another part of the Capri Hotel. Not long after I got through Benj. Mehlman of the S.A.J. formulated a resolution in line with what I had suggested. Just then Ira returned from the Women's meeting and shocked the meeting by expressing deep resentment at our making plans for a training school without regard for an entirely different approach which he had presented some time in the beginning of the year to the Board of Directors. On the principle of [...] I replied that I had not known about Ira's alternative plan, and I saw no reason why the money that might be raised could not be used for his alternative plan. The discussion of the problem of a school for the training of rabbis was suspended for an informal discussion Saturday afternoon at the new Reconstructionist Synagogue, and resumed at the Sunday morning meeting at the Capri Hotel. It was focused upon the resolution to raise \$250,000 to launch the project. After a long debate on the amount to be raised by the delegates of the Rec. Congregations, it was decided that anything less than one million dollars as an initial fund would be self-defeating.³⁶⁹

In "Beginnings, Memories, Bar Mitzvah", Ira Eisenstein offers his own explanation of the incident:

Dr. Kaplan challenged the group to provide a million dollars, and the college would be set up forthwith. I recall that the delegates – and their number was comparatively small – took up the challenge and vowed to raise that money. I also recall that, for the first time, I felt compelled to disagree publicly with my teacher; it seemed to me that the action was precipitous. As sometimes happens, action is postponed again and again – and then an attempt is made to plunge headlong.

The fact was that, for months prior to the convention, some of us had been quietly discussing with various individuals the possibility of putting together a sum of money which might give us a head start. Once the college came into existence, support would follow. In any event, the sessions closed with a consensus: that whichever way it was done, we were committed to getting into the business of training rabbis. We shall always remember Montreal as the place where it all happened.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁹ Kaplan Diary for June 9-10, 1967.

³⁷⁰ Pages 5-6.

The moment and its details are important for Reconstructionist history because of Eisenstein's initial resistance to the College idea as presented. The question as to what other specific options he may have had in mind is not answered by this material but would be of interest.³⁷¹

VI.2.2.4 Israel on the brink of the Six-Day War

As delegates debated and worshipped together over the Conference long weekend, the situation in the Middle East was on people's minds. Two days before the conference opened, on May 23, Egypt had closed the Straits of Tiran to Israel-bound ships, a move the Israelis viewed with alarm—as Colonel Dov Sinai made clear in his remarks at the Dedication Day ceremonies. During the opening ceremonies on Thursday evening, Chairman Stephen Barber expressed his thoughts in an interjection made between explanations about accommodations and plans for visiting Expo:

I don't think that any Jew wherever he lives, can go through these days in the same spirit of celebration and carefree mind because we feel that we are mobilized, just as today there is general mobilization in Israel, we are mobilized whether or not we are officers in the reserve army; we just feel that the Jewish people is in a state of mobilization, that everybody, whatever his position in Jewish life is, has to be prepared to stand by at very short notice for whatever may come. Therefore, whatever our original plans for this conference might have been, to discuss practical and theoretical and academical questions, I don't think that we can completely escape and disregard the circumstances under which we are meeting tonight. It might be necessary within this short space of time which is available to us, we might have to deal with some matters which are not on the agenda which is before me.

In his opening remarks, Lavy Becker began in ebullient mood, tying the blue and white Expo signage to Israel's national colours:

... whatever the reasons, you are here, and we are delighted to have you. Our welcome to you knows almost no bounds. You've noticed the Expo signs throughout all the streets? Of course, they're in blue and white! What else?

Becker goes on to talk about the President of Israel's visit, saying that "We managed to bring the President of the State of Israel direct for this week," but that there had been rumours the

³⁷¹ It is possible that the tape recorded materials might yield further insights if examined in full.

President was going to cut short his trip rather than stay on for the “rest of the festivities” – presumably Israel Independence Day celebrations, held that year on May 28th. Speaking as an insider, Becker regrets that he will not be able to share the information he would have gleaned from a planned meeting between himself and “a few of us in the community” with Canada’s then Minister of External Affairs, Paul Martin. They were to have “met with him at six tonight to discuss the whole question of the problems in Israel.” Becker continues, chiding the Americans for their “jingoistic” need to have their President (Lyndon Johnson) around:

... but you had to go send your President to us today and he has to go to Ottawa so Paul Martin had to go with him – so we don’t have last minute news because you have this jingoistic desire of yours to have your President on the scene, and he was here today, and some of you saw him, or saw his plane, Airforce Number 1, on our airstrip when you came in earlier today.

President Johnson had decided almost on the spur of the moment to come to Canada to meet with Prime Minister Lester Pearson to discuss the idea of “Big Four” talks on Vietnam, and to talk about the Mideast Crisis, stopping off for a visit to Expo on the way.³⁷² Prime Minister Pearson had received the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in creating the United Nations Peacekeeping Force as a way of defusing the 1956 Suez Crisis and his expertise on the Middle East was valued. As tense as the Middle East situation was at this date, however, Johnson’s worries about the war in Vietnam were equally critical, as opposition to the war from inside and outside his country was a serious problem.³⁷³ On this occasion Pearson and Johnson consulted as colleagues on matters of mutual concern; however, the two had clashed in the past over Vietnam, and Canada’s openness to draft dodgers would become a source of increasing tension between the two countries. In fact, objections to the Vietnam War would indirectly benefit Montreal’s Reconstructionist Synagogue, in different ways. The rabbi hired

³⁷² *Globe and Mail*, Friday, May 26, 1967, pp. 1-2. “Big Four” refers to the most powerful nations attending the Peace Conference at Versailles, 1919: United States, France, Britain, and Italy.

³⁷³ In 1966, Johnson had met with Israel’s President Zalman Shazar and asked him to help lessen Jewish protest against the Vietnam War as a way of showing appreciation for the US position on coming to the defence of small nations under attack (like Vietnam). A memo on this meeting is published under the heading *Presidents Johnson and Shazar Discuss Vietnam and Peace*, August 2, 1966 at <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/US-Israel/frus314.html>

by the community to take over from Lavy Becker was one of several who had signed on to the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, among other reasons, to receive a draft deferment. In succeeding years, the congregation would owe some of its highly engaged members and families to draft evasion (see citation and footnote 417, page 318).

VI.2.2.5 Expo 67

In spite of the tensions without and within, the Eighth Annual Conference of Reconstructionists, and the Dedication Day ceremonies it included, was a success, as was Expo 67. The Conference was planned to include, on Monday, a tour of Expo highlights for delegates. A bus was planned to fetch people from the hotel at 9 a.m. and take them to the site. There they would see the Israel Pavilion and also the Pavilion of Judaism, established by Rabbi Wilfred Shuchat and others to complement the secular, national focus of the Israeli and also to balance the Christian Pavilion.³⁷⁴ Delegates were also taken to see the Pavilion of Czechoslovakia, possibly the most popular at Expo and, coincidentally, the pavilion representing President Stephen Barber's country of birth. Barber had also arranged an exotic lunch for the group:

For lunch, which is very difficult to arrange for a large group at Expo, we have nevertheless through Mr. Barber – all of this is Mr. Barber's work – I'm so happy to be able to report to you -- that we're going to be able to have a light lunch together in the tea room of the pavilion of Ceylon.

Lavy Becker closed his outline of Expo plans with a request that any delegates who were planning to stay an extra day or two to see more of the fair, should give members of his congregation the pleasure of helping them ... he then invited his audience, who had just finished dinner together, to say the grace after meals.

³⁷⁴ The Reconstructionist Synagogue archives contain a copy of a citation to the Reconstructionist Synagogue from the Foundation for Judaism "in recognition of volunteer and other related services on behalf of the Pavilion of Judaism at Expo 67" signed by Sam Steinberg President and Wilfred Shuchat, Chair of the Program Committee.

For an account of the creation of the Pavilion of Judaism, see Wilfred Shuchat, *Gate of Heaven: The Story of Congregation Shaar Hashomayim of Montreal, 1846-1996* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000).

But if you're staying over, and you need some more guidance and help from us, whatever your plans may be, please let us have the satisfaction of being helpful to you, you do us that *mitzvah*.

Now my friends, I would like to suggest that in this relaxed fashion, we might *bentsch* (say the grace after meals) together...

The snapshot afforded by the foregoing citation shows Lavy Becker comfortable at the head of the Reconstructionist table. The tensions on the political front in Israel are grave, but Becker is relaxed. If there are problems, we may infer that his connections with the Montreal and Canadian Jewish community leadership will help him find ways to stay in touch and be useful, to be part of whatever solutions are possible. In the meantime, he proceeds by leading in his own "relaxed fashion" the traditional *bentsching* or grace after meals, according, we may confidently assume, to his father's *nusach*.

VI.3 Reflections on the Year 1967

For Montreal's Reconstructionist Synagogue, 1967 was a high point and a turning point, marking the fact that the "do-it-yourself" synagogue had arrived. The year was equally significant in the life of the Reconstructionist movement, as illustrated above. This year was also a focus for shifts in collective identity for Americans, for Canadians and for Jews everywhere, with particular effects noted by sociologist Nathan Glazer among Jewish youth in America.

VI.3.1 1967 for Jewish youth

In his introduction to Nathan Glazer's article "The Year 1967 and its Meaning," Jacob Neusner writes,

Rarely can we witness the birth of a star – or of a religious system. But the Judaism of Holocaust and Redemption was born in the three weeks from May 15, 1967 – when Egyptian President Nasser closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping [...] and declared his intention to destroy the State of Israel – to June 9,

1967. That was the day that the Six Day War came to a conclusion, with the reunification of Jerusalem [...].³⁷⁵

Glazer's article analyzes the effect that the events of 1967 had on Jewish young people and their sense of identity. He writes specifically about American youth, but his reflections are relevant, at least in part, to Canadian youth as well.³⁷⁶

As Glazer argues, unwillingness to fight for the country one had been born into, in the case of American youth and Vietnam, found its opposite in the case of those Jewish young people who felt a strong desire to go and fight for a country that they had not been born in but suddenly felt they did belong to, even though Israel had not necessarily meant much to them until this point:

And yet we must record that American Jews, among them even the Jewishly indifferent youth whose energies had for so long been engaged by the cause of the Negroes or the poor or the Vietnamese, suddenly discovered that the fate of Israel, of Jews of different language, culture, and state, meant more to them than these other causes.³⁷⁷

A central point in Glazer's argument, and in Neusner's, is that American Jews had been unable to integrate the enormity of what had happened in "the Holocaust," as it became known; in those days, Hitler's crematoria, the chimneys ... words failed except among those who had been there, in which case words were unnecessary. In the absence of a mythic or narrative structure that would receive the facts of what had happened, people were not capable of, or willing to, face the facts. At the other end of the emotional spectrum, American Jews initially did not know how to narrate the new reality that was the State of Israel, as it passed from millennial myth into political reality. Glazer argues that 1967 definitively changed people's emotional access to both:

³⁷⁵ Jacob Neusner, *Judaism in Modern Times* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1995).

³⁷⁶ The culture of the United States has been and continues to be enormously influential in Canada. It must also be emphasized that in 1967, as before and since, the influence goes both ways. In the late 1960s and 1970s many young people from the United States were attracted to Canada's social democratic form of government, as it was evolving during those years; many were attracted in particular to Canada's openness to receiving the youth who did not want to go to fight a war in Vietnam in which they didn't believe.

³⁷⁷ "The Year 1967 and its Meaning," 222.

Just as, writing in the mid-fifties, I could see no specific major impact of the state of Israel on the internal life of American Jews, I could see no specific major impact of the Holocaust. After 1967 this was no longer true. During the 1960s American Jews subtly became more sensitized to the enormity of the extermination of the Jews. The Israeli action in kidnapping, trying, and executing Adolf Eichmann in 1961 had some effect in getting Jews to think about the Holocaust. One can hardly avoid psychoanalytic language. These events had been repressed, not only among American Jews but among many of the survivors themselves, hundreds of thousands of whom had settled in the United States. Eichmann's trial made it impossible to repress the events any longer. Hannah Arendt's assessment of the events, which she covered for the *New Yorker* magazine and in her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), in which modern society in general and Jewish communal leadership specifically seemed to emerge as principal villains in the case, unnerved many Jews and was passionately attacked. Meanwhile Elie Wiesel's direct and unsparring books on the extermination camps, combined with his own commitment to the Jewish fate, also began to lead Jews to confront these overwhelming events.³⁷⁸

The events Glazer writes about struck members of the community at Lavy's Shul in different ways. As Jack Wolofsky's testimony will attest (see Chapter 7) it was Elie Wiesel's books that, just as Glazer suggests, made it possible for him to contemplate the horrors that had befallen God's "Chosen People". For Pierre Lasry, an alert and sensitive young man who had immigrated together with his parents and brother from Morocco, the events leading up to 1967 were the occasion of a "return to the fold," a return that happened initially thanks to Montreal's Reconstructionist Synagogue. Although Pierre Lasry had left Montreal for what turned out to be successful adventures in filmmaking in New York, anti-Jewish sentiment in Quebec had been a factor in his experience of growing up Jewish after arriving in Quebec from Morocco. Pierre Lasry's testimony eloquently echoes the points Nathan Glazer makes about "The Year 1967 and its Meaning."

In your encounter with the world, you define yourself as a Jew sometimes. Sometimes Germans or Nazis, or Québécois [do it for you]... When I came here, up until the Révolution tranquille there were ads in the paper that said "Jews abstain" or "non-WASPS abstain." So you were defined by others in a sense. People were telling you what you were. That's the negative part. As for the Jewish part, when I was living in New York, I always had the sense that when came Passover, or Rosh Hashanah, or Yom Kippur, I had to do something. But I think what precipitated looking inward, not outward for my identity [was] the

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 223.

Eichmann trial, [it] was a trigger for the whole of the Holocaust. It brought back all the memories that as a child I had completely evacuated. [...]

[After] the Eichmann trial, the Jews in the world were perceived as the guys who grabbed the evil, they did it illegally, they abused their power, they took him, they put him in a coffin, they brought him to Israel, they tried him.

Then came the Six-Day War. I volunteered. They laughed at me. The feeling we had in the 60s was that Israel was going to disappear, and we were willing to disappear along with it. This was a determining event for me. The Eichmann trial was an intellectual moment. The Six-Day War was a moment of gathering all the inner juices. I was willing to die for the Jewish people. That was it. I was willing to die for the Jewish people.

They sent us to Rome. I had just made my movie, I had no money. By the time we had waited two days in Rome, the war was over. Suddenly Israel, which was on the brink of dying, and we were ready to die for it, suddenly Israel had made it. It was an amazing thing that Israel did not end; it was not going to be another Holocaust. We were going to make it through that one. And that was a significant moment, as a person feeling part of a people.

From that moment on, I was part of the Jewish people. I was totally inseparable from that concept. I went back to the fold. I realized that I was part of a group, not something that was dead, something that was quite alive! It was a discovery.³⁷⁹

* * *

1967 became a defining moment, not just for Jewish youth but in the identity of the entire baby boom generation. Young Jews like Pierre Lasry, suddenly roused to patriotism, volunteered to go to fight for Israel. At the same time, many young Americans were protesting the war in Vietnam: some were burning their draft cards, some were coming to seek refuge in Canada, leaving their homes and families. While many youth protested, others did go to Vietnam, willingly or not, an experience that would mark their young lives deeply.³⁸⁰

During Expo summer many young Americans, and Canadians too, headed west to do things differently. These nomadic youth were described in the song *San Francisco* as “a new generation with a new explanation” though what, in the end, was explained remains an unanswered question. Certainly, a sense of expanding possibilities was part of the exuberance that was, in

³⁷⁹ Pierre Lasry, interview by author, 25 September 2000.

³⁸⁰ An excellent film on this subject is *America, love it or leave it*, produced by Kirwan Cox and Tom Shandel and narrated by Peter Gzowski. Oakville, Ont: Alioli Associates; Magic Lantern Communications, 1990.

the summer of 1967, a part of the new chapter in the life of Lavy's Shul that unfolded as the community settled into its newly dedicated home.

VI.3.2 New Configurations of Identity: "Vive le Québec Libre!"; New Immigration Regulations for Canada; Commission on the Status of Women; Black Studies, Women's Studies, Jewish Studies

The year 1967 marked the Canadian centennial. As has been stated above, the World's Fair held in Montreal that year was both an immense source of pride for French Canadians, who saw in it proof of how far their Quiet Revolution had taken them, and for English Canadians, who were collectively delighted with this brilliant celebration of universal brotherhood, "Man and His World," an island of hope in a world tense with Cold War and the nuclear threat, the Middle East Crisis and the unfolding trauma of Vietnam.³⁸¹ Truly an oasis of internationalism and positive energies, Expo and its exuberance was nonetheless underlain with tensions that were specific and local. At the end of the summer of 1967, General de Gaulle came to visit and caused a great stir when he shouted from the balcony outside Montreal City Hall to the throngs in the streets below, "Vive Montréal! Vive Québec! Vive le Québec Libre!" (Long live Montréal! Long live Québec! Long live a Free Québec!)³⁸² De Gaulle's ringing words were a signpost on the way to new kinds of freedom for Quebec and new kinds of alignments with French-speaking countries internationally. However, the new freedom to be proud and independent applied to the francophone majority only. The new narratives of identity for French Canadians, and then for "québécois and québécoises," tended to cast the English, "les anglais" in the role of oppressing other. Anglophones and Jews would see their freedoms restricted. In the years following the 1976 election of the Parti Québécois, English toponyms would be replaced with French ones. This, together with other practical and symbolic shifts

³⁸¹ In 1967, the Pearson government established the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. Over the succeeding decades, people would gradually become sensitized to sexist language and phrases like "Man and His World" or "brotherhood of man" would no longer be acceptable ways of talking about realities that involved men and women equally.

³⁸² The speech rings out with passion from the CBC archive website at http://archives.cbc.ca/IDC-1-73-236-1132-10/politics_economy/vive_quebec_libre/

would have the effect of erasing non-francophone parts of the province's collective memory.³⁸³

Other currents running through the year 1967 were literally changing the face of Canada. The Pearson government brought in new immigration regulations in 1967 that removed the last elements of racial discrimination from its immigration policy, making Canada the first of the major immigration countries to do so. The department of Citizenship and Immigration gave way to the new Manpower and Immigration department established at the end of 1965, marking the shift to a new vision. Canada had decided it wanted the kind of people who could support economic growth, rather than those who matched a particular ethnic profile, and established a "points system" in order to bring in skilled people with financial resources to meet the country's manpower needs.³⁸⁴

New manpower and immigration policies signalled a new era for Canadian identity. New people were coming as immigrants and cultural policy would eventually have to respond. The Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism was a critical step in the effort to update the way that Canada understood the reality of its two founding peoples and also cultural contributions of the "other ethnics", including Jews. Established in 1963 by the Pearson government, the Commission was expected to:

inquire into and report upon the existing state of bilingualism and biculturalism in Canada and to recommend what steps should be taken to develop the Canadian Confederation on the basis of an equal partnership between the two founding races, taking into account the contribution made by the other ethnic groups to the cultural enrichment of Canada and the measures that should be taken to safeguard that contribution.³⁸⁵

³⁸³ One of the few Francophone intellectuals to note and object to this erasure was Gérard Bouchard, who has argued for enriching collective memory in Québec with the histories of the Anglophones, native peoples and other minorities whose historical contributions have been important (see his *La Nation Québécoise au Futur et au Passé*, Québec: Boréal, 1996).

³⁸⁴ See Freda Hawkikns. "Canadian Immigration Policy and Management." *International Migration Review* 8-2 (1974): 141-153.

³⁸⁵ July 26, 2006. http://www.ocol-clo.gc.ca/archives/sp_al/2003/2003-05-26_e.htm

The findings of the Commission led to a policy of institutional bilingualism at the federal level (1969) and to the naming of a Minister Responsible for Multiculturalism (1972). Another important marker in the evolution of collective identities was the launching of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, established by the Pearson government in 1967 following pressure from women's groups. Starting in the late 1960s and continuing in the decades to follow across Canada and the United States, new departments of Black Studies, Women's Studies, Jewish Studies (1968, McGill) and others attested to the breadth and depth of commitment to new kinds of self-understanding, where groups that had been subjected to minority status and discrimination took matters into their own hands, forging the pathway of identity from shame to pride. New levels of self-consciousness and self-confidence were also behind the establishment of Canadian Studies programs, beginning in the lead-up to the Centennial with the *Journal of Canadian Studies*, launched at Trent University in 1966. For French-speaking Sephardic Jews in Montreal, the founding of the *Association sépharade francophone* in 1967 was a first step towards creating an independent voice and community (see the profile of Jean-Claude Lasry above).

VI.3.3 Changing Metanarratives: cracks in the Vertical Mosaic; the idea of civil religion; the Judaism of Holocaust and Redemption

The old order was changing. The Church of England-affiliated British "charter group" elite, decried for its unmerited position at the top of the heap in sociologist John Porter's influential book the *Vertical Mosaic*, was very gradually lessening its monopoly on power in Canada. Porter's contention was that the multi-ethnic "mosaic" of Canada was stacked vertically, with the British at the top and native peoples at the bottom. The country could not afford indefinitely, he argued, to squander its human resources of talent and intellect by excluding good people. Porter was struck by the absence of Jews among the intelligentsia "...what is striking is the absence of Jews in the higher levels of the intellectual community. It is unlikely

that there are so few in any other western society.”³⁸⁶ As Lavy Becker’s 1967 remarks suggest (see above on page 255), this reality changed rapidly in the years after Porter’s book was published in 1965.

As Gary Miedema argues, Canada was deliberately restructuring its public symbols and norms in the late 1960s and 1970s in order to “stabilize and unify the nation.” It was as part of this shifting picture that the Centennial Interfaith Conference chose to have a Jew as Chairman and Lavy Becker, with his Reconstructionist philosophy, was able to step onto the scene and make a difference.

The Interfaith Conference hoped it could realize its wish to help achieve the elusive “Canadian unity” by giving religion a unifying role to play. This religion would not conform to the old model, where the Church of England reigned over English Canada while the Catholic Church held sway over the French. The Interfaith Conference wanted to put a pan-Canadian sense of ultimate value into the picture. This was something new; it was something that would not last long. For the short time that it did last, it was perhaps the closest that Canada had come to the kind of “civil religion” Robert Bellah had written about with respect to the United States. Bellah’s article urged scholars to pay attention to the civil religion of America, to examine what it was made of. He began the process by enumerating key speeches in the American canon, characterizing the “American God” that is assumed in them, and naming a series of rituals that are part of the civil religion of America.

In “The Absence of Pan-Canadian Civil Religion: Plurality, Duality, and Conflict in Symbols of Canadian Culture,” Andrew Kim does not mention the brief interlude of the Canadian Interfaith Conference. His argument is that Canada’s two nations prevent it from having a civil

³⁸⁶ John Porter, *The Vertical Mosaic: An Analysis of Social Class and Power in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965) p. 501.

religion.³⁸⁷ The thrust of Kim's argument is that this is unfortunate, a negative. It should, however, be noted that while Bellah introduces symbolic elements, rituals and heroic individuals, in a way that demonstrates their potential to elicit altruism, his article also very clearly raises a warning. This strong cautionary note has to do with what can happen when a civil religion is used toward nationalist ends that may not be good or altruistic but that would instead be imperialistic. He specifically cites America's presence in Vietnam, so clearly a concern at the time his article was first published, in 1967. In this context Canada's lack of a civil religion is not necessarily a negative; the checks and balances built into the bi-national system may just as easily be understood as an advantage.

Robert Bellah's article was read by Ira Eisenstein from a Reconstructionist point of view. In an editorial that he published in *The Reconstructionist* magazine in 1967 (No. 19, Feb. 3 1967), Eisenstein commends Bellah for bringing forward what was, in Eisenstein's view, actually, "our idea," one that Reconstructionists had been writing about for some time. Eisenstein points out that it is part of the Reconstructionist understanding that every nation, every people, creates its own religion and America is no different. He is happy to see that the academic world has caught up with Reconstructionist thinking and recommends the book *The Faith of America*, Kaplan's liturgy for the holidays of the American civil calendar.

In marking shifts in the identities that affected life in Lavy's shul in and around the year 1967, mention must be made finally of Jacob Neusner's "American Judaism of Holocaust and Redemption." Neusner's writing on this subject includes an eerily resonant analysis of the dynamics of American Jewish life in the period following the Second World War, and his lament at the results of his own analysis.

³⁸⁷ *Sociology of Religion* 54-3 (1993) 257-275.

Neusner's contention is that there have been a series of different "Judaisms" ever since the destruction of Solomon's Temple, the latest of which came into being following the Six Day War in Israel. The mythic structure of this new Judaism, like the others before it,

tells Jews who they are, why they should be Jewish, what they should do because of that mode of identification, and, it goes without saying, who the Jewish group is and how that group should relate to the rest of the world and to history.³⁸⁸

Neusner argues that memory and hope were renewed with Israel's victory in June of 1967:

The third and fourth generations now had found their memory and hope, as much as Zionism had invented a usable past, Socialism in its Jewish formulation a viable future. It now could confront the murder of the Jews of Europe, along with its parents' and its own experience of exclusion and bigotry. No longer was it necessary to avoid painful, intolerable memories. Now what had happened had to be remembered, because it bore within itself the entire message of the new day in Judaism. That is to say, putting together the murder of nearly six million Jews of Europe with the creation of the State of Israel transformed both events. One became "the Holocaust," the purest statement of evil in all of human history. The other became salvation in the form of "the first appearance of our redemption."³⁸⁹

Neusner maintains that this new Judaism served the needs of American and Canadian Jews by allowing them to identify powerfully and emotionally as Jews, without troubling themselves with difficult things like studying Torah or observing the traditional commandments that once regulated Jewish behaviour. His conclusion is that intellect has given way to emotion, leaving barely any substance or depth to Jewish life:

Only the twentieth-century Judaism abandoned all interest in the canon of the Judaism of the dual Torah. That utterly secular Judaic system addressed emotions and attitudes, substituting stories for propositions subject to rigorous, logical analysis, sentimentality replacing intellectual substance.³⁹⁰

The new Judaism has proved powerful in the organizational arena as Jewry has become bureaucratized in order to meet the challenges of the age – challenges that extend beyond Jewish concerns.

What I have said applies not only to the Jews. It is merely another instance of the consequence of the ineluctable tasks of the twentieth century: to build large-scale

³⁸⁸ "Judaism of Holocaust and Redemption," 206.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 215.

³⁹⁰ From Neusner's "Epilogue" to *Judaism in Modern Times*, 230.

organizations to solve large-scale problems. Administrators, not intellectuals, bureaucrats, not charismatic thinkers formed the cadre of the hour. In an age in which, to survive at all, Jews had to address the issues of politics and economics, build a state (in the State of Israel) and a massive and effective set of organizations capable of collective political action (in the USA), not sages but *politicians* in the deepest sense of the word – namely, those able to do the work of the polity – alone could do what had to be done.³⁹¹

Questions relating to the role of Mordecai Kaplan’s kind of passionate intellect and rationality in the self-definition of Montreal’s Reconstructionist Synagogue would indeed arise and be opposed to new kinds of “spirituality,” as would issues of bureaucratization—but not during the Lavy years. What gave “Lavy’s Shul” its particular character was the way it combined vigorous intellect, questioning, experimentation, exploration and thought with real feeling. “Lavy’s Shul” was a counter-example to Neusner’s analysis. The material accumulated so far on the succeeding decades in the shul community suggest that only when it moved beyond the orbit of Lavy’s charisma and the culture of question and dialogue he created, would the forces Neusner identified truly begin to press upon this little community. This embryonic suggestion remains to be verified through further research and analysis.

* * *

After the high point of 1967, Lavy Becker began thinking about his own succession at the Reconstructionist Synagogue. In the absence of documentary evidence it is difficult to know exactly what he was thinking, or how early his thoughts on this subject had started. The “Word from Lavy Becker” reproduced below appeared in the October 18, 1971 Synagogue Bulletin. It suggests that Becker had started to plan at least as early as the arrangements he made to have “another rabbi” in for a visit. We may further speculate that his thinking about the series of young graduates of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College who came to speak at his synagogue began in 1968 with the inauguration of the College.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 238.

I have a feeling that we have entered into a new stage in our congregational development. In the first place, we had, for the first time, “another” rabbi. He was most effective and you reacted deeply and warmly. Aside from the depth of the experience itself, it is important for your future. You must begin to think of the possibility of “another” rabbi on a permanent basis.

There is a palpable fondness in the tone with which Lavy Becker addresses his congregation.

The sense of a boundary enclosing an intimate community resonates from the spectre of “another rabbi” and there is warmth and affection in the way Becker speaks to the collective “you” of the shul community.

The elegance with which Lavy Becker handled his succession is remarkable. Equally, the community played its part, debating and planning how to handle the growth that would lead to the need for change and a paid rabbi. The next chapter documents the process of expansion briefly. It then focuses on a profile of Jack Wolofsky as a transitional figure between the old and new orders and finally returns to Lavy Becker for the last word.

Chapter Seven

VII 1976, Transition – Keeping the Faith with Kaplan; Changing Times, the Extension, the New Rabbi

VII.1 Changing Times, the Extension

The summer of 1976 was a transitional moment for the Reconstructionist synagogue as it worked to complete its expansion in time to welcome the new rabbi. The summer also represented a sea change in Quebec. The Olympics came to Montreal, and the influx of athletes and visitors from around the world coloured the city streets. But the pleasure was attenuated. The Munich Massacre that had blighted the 1972 Games meant that there was very tight security everywhere. And then, before the Games were due to open in July, 32 mostly black African nations walked out in protest because the International Olympic Committee had refused to ban New Zealand, whose national rugby team had toured segregated South Africa. Further, the Peoples' Republic of China successfully persuaded Canada to deny the Taiwanese the right to compete as the Republic of China and Taiwan also withdrew. Unforeseen expenditures on security, together with mismanagement and corruption meant that costs for the Games soared from the \$310 million first estimated to more than \$1.5 billion. Mayor Jean Drapeau's dream of a self-financing Olympics, a great public event to rival the success of Expo 67, had become something of a nightmare. People's weariness with huge spending on grandiose schemes while garbage remained uncollected and the poor were without housing certainly contributed to the election of the Parti Québécois. The years that followed were challenging ones for Quebec's anglophones and especially for the Jews among them, many of whom chose to leave the province when the separatist Parti Québécois was first elected in the same year the new rabbi arrived. Just two later, in 1978, the Reconstructionist Synagogue

would send out a memo seeking help from the congregation due to declining numbers and citing as cause the “Quebec trend,” meaning the outflow of Jews from Quebec.³⁹²

Still, in the early 1970s, the mood was positive within the Reconstructionist Synagogue community. The experiment that was “Lavy’s Shul” had proved to be a success, and there was talk of renovation and expansion. Because this was a synagogue and not a *havurah* meeting in people’s homes, the idea of expanding came more naturally than it would have to a smaller, more informal group. However, agreement was not universal. The shul offered real warmth, intimacy and a sense of belonging, as befitted a Reconstructionist group, and there were those who were convinced that expanding would be a mistake. Some left disillusioned.³⁹³ But most stayed.

The first meeting of the committee on the implications of membership growth was held on November 26, 1972. The decision to expand had not yet been taken. The minutes record that Sol Venetsky suggested membership be limited to its current level but Lavy Becker expressed concern that this might prevent the spread of Reconstructionism in Montreal.³⁹⁴ Becker thought that “a second Reconstructionist Congregation might be required by [1974 or 1975] and [that he] would probably be required for this group.”³⁹⁵ Therefore a paid rabbi would be needed to look after the founding community. Some felt that the current facilities should be expanded but others did not, given that overflow was only really a problem over the High

³⁹² An undated letter from the synagogue archives and addressed to “Dear Member” reads: “We need your help [...] [We have] added an extra \$25 to our family membership. [...]But that will not be enough if the Quebec trend continues. [...]We believe our synagogue is something special. Your own responses have led us to know it. [...]” The plea is “Help us find new members.”

³⁹³ In 2002, over 25 years after the original synagogue expansion, I contacted a member whom I had been told had left in protest at the expansion. Even after all these years, this individual was still so upset that he refused to speak with me and in fact hung up the phone! Warm and charming initially, he explained that he had known that the founding values would not be preserved.

³⁹⁴ The minutes read: “The present membership stands at 188 families, of which 160 have children and consequently the total membership consists of approximately 500 persons.” Minutes of first meeting of the Committee on the Implications of Membership Growth. National Archives of Canada. MG 31, H81, Vol. 4.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

Holidays. Still others mentioned the overcrowding when too many guests were invited for bar mitzvahs, putting strain on the “very limited kitchen facilities.” David Saibil said that the 40 to 50 members who attended regularly on the Sabbath were a “suitable number for proper participation.” However Sidney Becker suggested that perhaps “the time was approaching when we might require a full time spiritual leader, since Lavy Becker was functioning strictly on a volunteer basis and without salary.” Lavy Becker mentioned that in 1973 the Rabbinical School would graduate the first of its students, that this student was interested in working in Montreal and that he would be available to help part-time.

At the second meeting, held December 17th, 1972, Bob Mayers’ sub-committee on ways to improve the facilities reported that the three main problems to be corrected were: 1) the kitchen was too small 2) the serving facilities were inadequate and 3) there was a lack of overall storage space. Mayers, together with Sydney Kom and Reuben Brasloff proposed that the space be expanded by constructing a mezzanine at the north end of the synagogue, with an upper level to be used for additional seating space. The lower area would be used to expand the kitchen and as a large multi-purpose space that could be closed off from the sanctuary with a folding door. Sydney Becker added that a prefab building could be constructed at the rear for storage. The total cost of all improvements was estimated at between \$10,000 and \$15,000 and the intention was stated to cover the costs in such a manner so as not to increase the congregation’s debt.

The expansion proposals were put to the membership and were approved. At the same time Reuben Brasloff suggests that Lavy was still firmly in control of “his” shul and that his influence was decisive:

There was a great controversy when Lavy sort of stampeded me into getting the little extension built to our shul. That Rosh Hashanah was the first time I could speak as the President and everyone was upset—why should we do this! Where is

our future! I said, 'Look, we admire a cute toddler. Now our toddler's at the stage of a difficult teenager. You've got to nurture it to let it grow up!'³⁹⁶

Construction on the extension started in June of 1975, following a successful fundraising campaign. The road was not entirely smooth, however, as Brasloff remembers:

There was a general construction strike while we were putting up the addition. Ernie Shapiro's employees, they worked there [and] a couple of Ernie Shapiro's senior supervisors would sneak in before light in the morning, and they would work until after dark, so the goons wouldn't get to them. [...] The Catholics who were working there, had a reverence for something religious³⁹⁷

In the booklet entitled "Memories: Celebrating 36 Years of Jewish Renewal"³⁹⁸ Reuben Brasloff writes that the addition was built up against the shul building without demolishing its existing back wall so as not to disturb the regular activities in the sanctuary. Once it was complete, then the back wall had to be taken down:

This was started just before lunch hour on a sunny morning in July and about a dozen cement blocks were already removed when I came by to check the job. After I had been up on the new balcony I ran back downstairs, burst into the office and insisted that Phyllis Beer come back up there with me to view the ark and stained glass windows from that perspective. The view through a ragged hole in a wall and a gentle haze of dust along with shafts of sunlight streaming in through those windows revealed an ethereal dimension to what I consider an outstanding and unique synagogue art form. [...]

After a series of what appeared to be insurmountable complications, I came back to shul for services that evening, -- everything was miraculously completed in time to welcome our new rabbi. It takes all sorts of devoted people to make miracles happen.³⁹⁹

³⁹⁶ Interview with Reuben Brasloff, February 27th, 2003. Reuben Brasloff told the same story in the Synagogue Bulletin, with further details:

"The first thing Lavy tossed in my lap when I became President in 1975 was that our building was too small. We had tripled in membership from about 50 to the 150 families by then. He made it easy for me by organizing a pep rally at his apartment. An Architect was hired and I worked with him as the project manager. I also prepared the Mechanical plans and Ernie Shapiro took care of the Electrical. His firm also did the electrical work at cost. We broke ground in June and the two-story addition was fully completed by Erev Rosh Hashanah, which was very early in September. As the project manager I was on the job site every lunch hour to ensure that we were on schedule, notwithstanding a general strike in the industry that summer.

Following Lavy's example, Ernie and I worked pro bono. Our fundraising was so successful that within two years after completion we had cleared the mortgage on the original building and the bank loan for the extension. We remained debt free all these years until now."

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁸ Montreal: Congregation Dorshei Emet, 1996.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.* Brasloff continues: "the reader might notice that our secretary at that time was called Phyllis Beer. The first wedding ceremony that Rabbi Ron performed in our shul changed her name to Phyllis Brasloff."

Construction of the addition was completed in June of 1976 in time to welcome Rabbi Ron Aigen in August.

VII.1.1 Keeping the Faith with Kaplan: Jack Wolofsky

The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College started graduating rabbis in 1974 and, like Ron Aigen, the graduates were baby boomers, members of a new generation, with different memories, a different shared culture, and different aspirations. In this changing landscape, Jack Wolofsky, born in 1930 and a shul member since 1965, occupies a special place.⁴⁰⁰ Probably more than any of the other shul members, Jack Wolofsky was personally affected by his encounter with Mordecai Kaplan. Certainly it was Wolofsky, more than anyone else, who would continue to keep Kaplan's spirit and thought alive at the Reconstructionist synagogue as it moved into its second major phase of growth and development. In the new era, overall shifts in the movement meant that Kaplan would be less central than he had been in "Lavy's Shul" – which had also benefited from Lavy Becker's relationship with Kaplan and from Kaplan's visits to the shul. One might well say that the tensions between Wolofsky's perspective and that of the new rabbi define a landscape of change between the old order and the new in Reconstructionism, increasingly so following the death of Kaplan in 1983 at the age of 102.

A profile of Jack Wolofsky is included here because of the particular way in which he understood Kaplan and Reconstructionism and because of the way he continued to value that understanding as the Reconstructionist synagogue moved past the 1976 turning point. Intensely committed to his experience of "Lavy's Shul" and the values it embodied, Jack

⁴⁰⁰ There may be something in Mordecai Richler's novelistic characterization of this generation in the mind of his hero, Jake, from *St. Urbain's Horsemen*, as "young too late, old too soon" (Toronto: McLelland and Stuart, Emblem Editions, 2002, p. 91), not old enough to have fought and suffered, or young enough to have enjoyed the hedonism of the baby boomers. "Conceived in the depression, but never to taste its bitterness firsthand, they had actually contrived to sail through the Spanish Civil War, World War II, the holocaust, Hiroshima, the Israeli War of Independence, McCarthyism, Korea, and, latterly, Vietnam and the drug culture, with impunity. Always the wrong age. Ever observers, never participants. The whirlwind elsewhere." p. 92.

Wolofsky would argue passionately over the succeeding decades that those values were not being fully honoured in the new order.

Some shul members are fond of using terms like “classical Kaplanian” to speak about Jack Wolofsky but such terms, resonating as they do with a sense of the doctrinaire disciple, are inaccurate. The latter point becomes clear in a speech Wolofsky made in 2003, a quarter of a century after the 1976 watershed, to the congregation at the Reconstructionist Synagogue on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of his becoming bar mitzvah. In this speech, he jokingly referred to his path away from the Orthodoxy of his youth to the “ultra-Orthodox” Kaplanian views he came to be associated with. Here the sincerity and depth of conviction that typify Jack Wolofsky are in evidence, along with his convincing explanation as to why he continues to speak for Kaplan’s values and methods:

Since then [since childhood years in the Orthodox synagogue], I have become Ultra Orthodox, an Ultra Orthodox Kaplanian Reconstructionist. This is not hero worship. I venerate Kaplan because for me, he legitimized dissent and rationality in religious belief. He made it obligatory to work for change not only in the Jewish world but in all aspects of human endeavour where the individual feels it necessary, for the betterment of humankind.⁴⁰¹

A fuller appreciation of what Reconstructionism and Mordecai Kaplan have meant to Jack Wolofsky, and the deep roots of the values that are involved, emerges from his life story as he told it in his bar mitzvah anniversary speech and in interviews. Jack’s wife Kay, a clear-headed, articulate, engaged and enthusiastic member of the community at “Lavy’s Shul,” offers supplementary information.

VII.1.2 Jewish background

Jack Wolofsky’s family background ensured a connection with Montreal Jewish life, as his grandfather was one of the architects of Montreal’s Jewish community. Among many other

⁴⁰¹ The citations in this section are from interviews by the author with Jack Wolofsky, 16 December 2000 and 1 July 2005 and also include material from a speech that Wolofsky made to the congregation on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of his bar mitzvah, on April 3, 2004.

accomplishments,⁴⁰² Hirsch Wolofsky was the founding editor of the *Keneder Odler* (Canadian Eagle),⁴⁰³ the Yiddish-language newspaper that helped create and define Montreal's downtown community starting in 1907. However, the times Jack Wolofsky grew up in, together with his personal character and circumstances meant that he could not simply bask in the reflected glow of his illustrious grandfather, but rather that he would emerge with a complex and textured sense of Jewish life. On the one hand, his parents and grandparents left him as legacy a life-long passion for Yiddish and a sense of Jewish community and of commitment to community. At the same time, Wolofsky's formative years were marked by profound doubts about the Judaism he had inherited. These doubts arose thanks to a questioning nature but also to an adolescence marked by the personal pain of living with an ailing and then a dying father, compounded by communal suffering in the lead-up to the Second World War and then the horrific events of the Holocaust. The characteristic profile of a Reconstructionist was etched deeply into Jack Wolofsky's path, both an attachment to Jewish life and a sense of rupture with it, so that by the time he encountered Lavy Becker and then Kaplan, he needed no convincing: he was already there.

* * *

Like Lavy Becker and like Kaplan himself, Wolofsky's reference experiences for Jewish community came from the Orthodoxy of his youth.⁴⁰⁴ In Jack Wolofsky's family, intensity of Jewish feeling occurred not as much in the area of religious practice—where grandfather

⁴⁰² See Hirsch Wolofsky's autobiography translated into French by Pierre Anctil as : *Mayn Lebns Rayze: Un demi-siècle de vie yiddish à Montréal* (Québec: Septentrion, 2000). Also, the somewhat abbreviated and edited translation by A.M. Klein as: *Hirsch Wolofsky, Journey of My Life: A Book of Memoirs* (Montreal, Canada: Eagle Publishing Co. 1945) and Ira Robinson's "New Thoughts From an Ancient Source: Hirsh Wolofsky's commentary on the Torah." In *Rabbis and Their Community: Studies in the Immigrant Orthodox Rabbinate in Montreal, 1896-1930* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, forthcoming).

⁴⁰³ See *Through the Eyes of the Eagle: The Early Montreal Yiddish Press 1907-1916*. Translated by David Rome, Edited and with an introduction by Pierre Anctil (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 2001).

⁴⁰⁴ The downtown community was an Orthodox community: it did not include Reform or Conservative synagogues. Clearly, however, "Orthodoxy" meant different things to different people.

Hirsch Wolofsky was not averse to “bending the rules”—as it was in a deep commitment to fellow Jews and to Jewish life and culture:

I came from what you would call a very committed Jewish home. Not in an orthodox or religious sense in terms of practice, but in terms of commitment to Jewish life. [...] We kept a kosher home, two sets of dishes, [but] my maternal grandparents went to shul [only] on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur.

[In addition to running the household and caring for my father, who was not physically well all of my life] ... my mother had a role to play in my development process. She played songs from the Folk song books, which my father had bought for her and thus taught me the love of Yiddish poems and melodies. For me, this is Jewish Civilization.

[My father] was 17 when, against the wishes of my Grandfather he enlisted in the Jewish Legion. He wished to fight for a Jewish homeland in Palestine. He trained as an officer in Windsor, Nova Scotia and went overseas to Palestine. He then was stationed in Alexandria, Egypt where he developed encephalitis. He came back to Montreal, was nursed back to health by my mother and then worked for my Grandfather at the Jewish Eagle, writing humorous articles in Yiddish, some of which I have found. His greatest joy, next to his wife and children, was in helping immigrants to find their place in Canada. Where he could, he helped those who needed to get out of Eastern Europe and in one case adopted a family as relatives to enable their immigration here.

I can recall in the early nineteen forties a group of young men came to our house to thank my father. They were German Jews who had escaped Germany to England on the "Kindertransport" and were sent to Canada as enemy aliens. My Father had secured their release from incarceration. [...] This commitment to community is a trait I have tried to emulate.

Family values included a commitment to Zionism and to labour. Despite the fact that Hirsch Wolofsky had himself achieved success in many domains, including the material, there was a loyalty to downtown:

[...] that was the leaning; the *arbeiter*, the worker. That sense of commitment to the working class, the labour class, despite the fact that my grandfather was rather well off. He wasn't rich, but he had a house in Outremont; he lived well ... There was a sense of commitment to the working class; there was always that, as opposed to the “uptown Jews,” the Westmount Jews.

In terms of religious practice, Hirsch Wolofsky was “a rascal”, at least some of the time, as Jack recounted with evident pride:

After a benefit dinner in honour of Rabbi Shoham at the Queen E. [Queen Elizabeth Hotel, in downtown Montreal] Kay and I were called over by Rabbi Hirschprung who started as follows "*Dien Ziedda is geven a masick*" [Your Grand

father was a rascal.] He then proceeded to tell me the following story. When Ha Rav Kook was visiting in Montreal, my Grandfather invited him to Shabbat services at the Adath Yeshurun. At Kiddush, my Grandfather asked of Ha Rav Kook "*Nochan Davenen meg men nemen a sex un nintzik*" [After prayer, may we take a 96?] The Rabbi, presuming a 96 proof alcoholic drink responded "Avada" [of course]. My Grandfather then told his friends that he had the *hechsber* from the Chief Rabbi of the Holy Land to take the Number 96 streetcar home, which he then proceeded to do. I had heard this story many times, but was sceptical, till I heard it from Rav Hirschprung, who told it to me with a smile and with reverence.

Looking back, Jack Wolofsky was proud that his grandfather apparently believed that "Judaism could be reinterpreted to meet the modern world." This allowed him to respond to those in the community who would attack him saying that "Hirsch Wolofsky's grandson would not be going to a Reconstructionist synagogue!" Jack Wolofsky's confident response would be "If my grandfather were alive today, he would have been a Reconstructionist!"

* * *

Jack Wolofsky's childhood experiences of synagogue were at the Adath Yeshurun, where he had "yichus," or standing in the community thanks to the merit of his forbears. His uncle was parnass there and his grandfather had helped the late Rabbi Hirschprung to immigrate to Montreal from China, by "pulling strings." The life cycle events of bar mitzvah and the saying of *kaddish* for his father brought him a lasting appreciation of what went on at Adath Yeshurun, despite the fact that he also discovered that traditional prayer was not for him. In his bar mitzvah anniversary speech, Jack Wolofsky described this synagogue as he remembered it:

I don't know how many people here remember the shul, Adath Yeshurun. In the style of all European synagogues, the *bimah* was in the middle of the main floor and the women were upstairs in the balcony. In fact I have the image of my Mother and Grandmother standing at the edge of the balcony looking down at me and *kvelling*⁴⁰⁵. There was no decorum, with men walking around, talking,

⁴⁰⁵ One of those magnificent Yiddish words exactly describing a particular emotion, "kvell" refers to the special kind of delight that comes with pride in the accomplishments of (usually) children and grandchildren. Here Jack probably refers to the celebration of his becoming bar mitzvah.

praying at their own pace, and sharing "a *shmeck tabit*" (snuff tobacco) since you could not smoke on the Sabbath.[...] When the noise grew too loud my uncle, the *parnass*, who sat in a special chair, facing the congregation, on the side of the stairs leading up to the *Oren Kodesh*, the Ark, would pound his hand on the reading table in front of him and silence would ensue for a few short minutes. [...]

After mother and grandmother had looked down from the balcony, brimming with pride at their bar mitzvah boy, Jack's mother suggested that he attend regularly to pray with the men, which he did, "For my mother's sake I went," but not for very long, as the donning of the phylacteries seemed to him forced.⁴⁰⁶ Jack's next, somewhat more extended, experience with the synagogue came after the death of his father, aged only 47:

When I was 16, my Father's death left me angry and questioning: could there be a god who allowed so much suffering? My mother suggested that I say Kaddish, not for my Father, for whom it would have meant nothing, and again not for God, if there was one, but for myself. I did, going to the synagogue twice a day, then once a day, then once a week, and when I felt that I had expiated my guilt feelings for the anger I had felt at my father's being sick and dying, I stopped.

Although his own prayer experience lacked ongoing resonance, young Jack was impressed by the atmosphere at the synagogue, by the joy and intensity he found there. For Jack it was this, and not what went on at the uptown Reform Temple Emanuel, that was worthwhile: "To me this was authentic and those at the Temple were assimilationists." He often found occasion to recall the intensity of prayer he observed at Adath Yeshurun, including in an interview with Barry Lazar:

... I was impressed. These people would cover their heads with their tallit, they would "*shuckle*," [sway back and forth] they believed God heard their prayers, that they had a direct line up to Him. And the learning they did! Between *mincha* and *maariv* [afternoon and evening prayers] they had a learning session. These men were not worldly wise but they would study the parsha, they would question the rabbi, it wasn't a teaching experience, it was a learning experience. These people came for the study, the learning. I imagine they waited all day for this hour and a half, the ecstasy they found in learning and joy in learning.⁴⁰⁷

As Jack continued, he immediately made a connection to his experience of Mordecai Kaplan.

⁴⁰⁶ From the bar mitzvah speech: "In reading Kaplan's diaries I find that he had the same problem with *tefillen* as did I."

⁴⁰⁷ This paragraph is from an interview Barry Lazar did with Jack Wolofsky on October 8, 1985.

As I look back at Kaplan, there was that joy in teaching and learning. When he was teaching, he was learning. When you threw something back at him, Kaplan would argue with you. It was the same with these elderly men who sat with Rabbi Hirschman – who would lead, because Rabbi Hirschprung gave him the chance ... This ecstasy in learning! This is what the Jewish people is all about!⁴⁰⁸

Although Jack Wolofsky's Jewish background was strong and varied, growing up as he did during the years before the Second World War and then during that horrific period, and in addition having the pain of seeing his ailing father die young, Jack Wolofsky was faced with the most problematic of issues and questions: How can a loving God allow such suffering? Where was God during the Holocaust? How can it be that we are God's chosen people and yet we seem to have been singled out only to suffer terribly? For Jack, given his background and personal makeup, these questions were essential: if he could not answer them to his own satisfaction, it would be difficult if not impossible for him to continue to hold Jewish life as a central value, to continue to "be a good Jew." And yet, there were no answers. In his own mind as a boy, lying on his bed at night, the only answers were negative ones. It is not possible to believe in this God and therefore it is not possible to be a good Jew, an unwelcome but inevitable conclusion.

VII.1.3 Doubts about how to be a good Jew and ...

Jack Wolofsky's questions began when he was a boy in elementary school in the years just before the outbreak of The Second World War, and continued through high school—a period during which Jack had to work to help the family financially:

So I grew up in this [rich Jewish environment]. But I was always ... wondering. We're God's chosen people. Why is it we're always suffering?? [...] As a child I remember lying on my bed and I couldn't understand it, I couldn't understand it, we're God's chosen people. How can we be chosen and still ... [...]

I remember I was nine years old, or perhaps 8 years old, when my maternal grandfather wrote poetry about Hitler, and what an awful man he was ... I remember the talk, going to Folk Shule, in Grade 2 and Grade 1, before the war. I remember we used to buy this piece of paper: "The four pigs. Find the 5th pig." And you folded up these papers and out of the rear end of the pig you got the

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

face of Hitler. Grade 2 and Grade 3; I remember it. This was 1938; in 1939, I was in Grade 3, and going to the [Jewish People's] school⁴⁰⁹ on Waverly street. I remember standing out on the rear fire escape and people talking about the war. The war had just broken out.

I remember not much longer after that, discussions of conscription. There were gangs going along St. Lawrence Blvd and breaking the windows of all the Jewish stores. .. oh yes! Here in Montreal. At the YMHA they would say, "C'est une guerre pour les juifs; c'est pas une affaire qu'on va faire la guerre pour les juifs." [This is a war for the Jews; we're not going to go make war for the Jews.]

I went to Baron Byng high school, and it was 99% Jewish. Maybe out of a thousand, there were 10 non-Jewish ... What was it like? Well, my dad died when I was in Grade 10. It was hard. I worked in the evenings. I worked Saturday evenings too. I didn't make that many friends. I always felt, they didn't have cares. I felt I had responsibilities; my father had not been well

After completing high school, Jack went on to study at Dawson College in St. Jean-sur-Richelieu. While still remaining connected to Judaism, he deliberately branched out from his Jewish roots, diversifying his friendships and activities.

I went off to college and searched for the Universal. I attended Baha'i, and Unitarian services, ate meals in a Lutheran Church dining room, and sang in a glee club, which once assisted in a United Church service.

Of course I liked to go home for the weekend. But then I liked singing; and then I joined the choir. They had a glee club. So, we sang songs, we sang in the chapel on Sundays, so I stayed over a weekend ... And I made it a point to try and be friends with non-Jewish people. I made a very close friendship with one fellow and some others as well [...] My first time having bacon, and ham, and ... it was not kosher! And I was part of it. You know, I questioned myself, what was going to happen, what am I doing? I don't know at what point I said, There is no God.

[...] and yet, I joined Hillel. [...] I still had a lot of studying to do. And then we went back to McGill campus [from Dawson College]. And then of course I had these friends that I'd been at Dawson with and I stayed with them. Not to say I didn't have Jewish friends; I joined the choir at Hillel. I also joined the McGill Choral Society. We didn't sing in any churches in the choral society. With Yehudah Vineberg, in the Hillel choir—in fact Hillel Becker was in that choir.

⁴⁰⁹ Wolofsky commented on his mother's choice of the Jewish People's School: "I remember this very clearly – I was sent to the Jewish People's School. This caused a certain amount of friction with my grandfather, my paternal grandfather, who would rather have seen us go to the Talmud Torah, since he was in a sense the builder of the United Talmud Torahs. He was also the publisher of the *Keneder Odler*, which was a Yiddish newspaper. It was something as a child I couldn't understand. After all, the *Keneder Odler* was a Yiddish paper, and here he is the publisher of a Yiddish paper and he's expecting me to go to a school where I'll be learning all Hebrew, and no Yiddish. ... This was something in my mind: why does *ayde* prefer that I go to Talmud Torah, [...] He questioned it. But he was happy. Because at that time I was among the only grandchildren going to Jewish school [...] One of my cousins went to Talmud Torah but the others didn't go to Jewish schools; not my cousins here and certainly my cousins in Toronto, in Hamilton, weren't going to Jewish schools; so he stayed quiet about it. This was still a Jewish education ..." Interview with the author, 16 December 2000.

And Hillel Becker was President of Hillel at one point. Yehudah Vineberg even asked me to sing in his synagogue choir at the Spanish and Portuguese. By that time I was already becoming secular. But I still couldn't really reconcile my Judaism with not believing in a God. In other words, how can you really be a Jew ... that was my sense of Judaism: you have a God, and we're his chosen people, so how can you be a Jew without that?

It was still a questioning period, really. How can there be a God? And then, as things moved on, I began to understand, not understand but know more about the Holocaust, to get more information. More reading about it. My first real reading about the Holocaust, other than news reports, was *Black Sabbath*. By Robert Katz. That was probably in the early 60s. I had had *Night* on my night table for months, and I couldn't get myself to read it. I couldn't pick it up to read it. But *Black Sabbath*, which was the story of the rounding up of the Jews in Rome; and the fact that the Fascists, the Nazis had the lists of every member of the Jewish community; and the fact that Jews had time to not follow orders; and the fact that Jews when the train stopped at certain places, there was no one to stop them from walking away. And the fact that the priests and the Pope all knew what was going on. It opened my eyes; it was an opener, after which I was able to go on to read Elie Wiesel. I read *Night*. It left a very deep impression on me. Of the suffering ... that was later of course.

[The period during which I was studying] was a good period in my life. I was training. I was working for the summer out in St. Jean Québec, not far from Dawson College. Travelling out there, coming back at night, training for the choir, for Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur. The thoughts of God were still there, what does it mean; the questioning, how can I be a good Jew if I don't go to synagogue? All this was there, germinating

VII.1.4 Marriage and the Orthodox synagogue; Children and synagogue shopping

Then Jack met Kay, a young woman, widowed, with a small child; they married, and then had two more children together. Jack and Kay each had strong connections to traditional Orthodox synagogues, but Jack especially took Jewish issues too seriously to accept the places offered them and the couple went seeking a better solution. For Jack Wolofsky, finding Lavy Becker's Reconstructionist Synagogue and then meeting and becoming involved with Mordecai Kaplan and his thought, were vindicating, life-changing events and the years of involvement with Lavy's shul were stimulating, exciting and memorable.

When I got married, at that time I was doing consulting engineering work. My father-in-law wanted to build this new synagogue to commemorate the city. They had a small *shteibl* on St. Urbain street; then the most important thing was the cemetery, for all the *landsmen* from Ozeroff; and so I did the engineering work for his synagogue. He was President, so he bought the whole front row; it had my name, and my brother-in-law's name, my father-in-law's name.

My wife was upstairs. I'd come in and I was just miserable. I thought, he had my name put on the seat! So for *yom tov* I'd come in for a short period, then I'd gesture to Kay, let's leave ... and we'd go out. It was a very difficult thing for me. Here's his generosity, these seats, we have our name on our seats, but this is not me!

If Jack was miserable downstairs, Kay was not happy in the balcony, and had not been before she met Jack, when she attended the first, small, Anshei Ozeroff shul. In fact, the women in Kay's family had exerted their independence and gone instead to the *B'nai Jacob* synagogue on Fairmount, where there was a wonderful choir and banked seating so the women could see:

What my mother didn't like about the Ozeroff synagogue was that it was a little *shtetl* on St. Urbain street – this is before they built the new one on Bourrett. The little house on St. Urbain was a duplex. The ladies sat upstairs, and there was a hole in the floor of the upstairs Unless you were sitting in the first row, you saw nothing [...] and you couldn't hear because the ladies were all chit-chatting away anyway. My brother would go and sit downstairs with my father. I guess at that point I accepted the fact that the guys and the girls sat separately. But it did bug me being up there. You could only see the tops of their heads. So the women were truly out of sight, and probably out of mind. This was very disconcerting to me.

Also my mother didn't like that at all. [...] There were people whom she didn't care too much for, some people who may have been gossip mongers, who may have been unpleasant; it wasn't her kind of people. So my mother and grandmother took the decision to go to the late-lamented Fairmount shul. Although it was separate seating and Orthodox, the women's area upstairs was banked, like a theatre, so you could see everything and hear everything. [...] From my childhood memory, I would guess that the cantor and choir were superb. Every time we sing *eytz chaim bi, l'ma hazikim ba, v'tomcheiba meushar* as we do at the closing of the ark and the end of the Torah reading, I still hear them resonating in my mind ... this is incredible ... I'm even getting a lump in my throat when I think about it. I can hear the *hazan* and the choir singing that song.

Kay married at 19, and she and her husband had a son soon thereafter, in 1955. The couple had started looking for a synagogue to join as a family but tragically her husband became ill and died, leaving her with a two-year-old child. The search for a synagogue began again after Kay and Jack had met and married and then had two more children together. Jack remembers:

Then there was the question, we're going to have a bar mitzvah. Lawrence was born in '55, had his bar mitzvah in '68. By 1964, 65, we thought, let's go round and see where we want to be; we don't want our son in the Anshei Ozeroff [...] and there was nothing there for me.

We made the rounds; we went to the Temple; we went to the Shaar Hashomayim. Then we heard about the Reconstructionists; that Hillel's father [...] had a synagogue. So we called Hillel, we went to his house. We said, "Hillel, tell us about what's this Reconstructionism, your father started this ... what is it?"

Well, Hillel said, it was something that Rabbi Kaplan ... it didn't mean much to me. He said, "Come to service at Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur;" they were meeting at the JPPS. So we went, and Lavy started to talk. Just the way he talked, about Kaplanian thought ... we don't believe in a supernatural God. At one point he said, it was just before *yizkor*. He said, we don't believe in a hereafter; but we believe that the spirit of a person lives on, in what he leaves for others, what he imparts to others. Therefore, during the *yizkor* service, we don't want the children to leave. We want the children to stay, with the parents. So they can see how we pay respect to the people who came before us; we can be assured that they will learn, and they will pay respect to our memories. I nudged Kay and I said, "He makes sense!"

So, after these experiences, I called Lavy and I said, I'd like to come and meet you. And Lavy and I met. At that time, 1965, we were about 30 families, 30, 35 families. The building was being built. We joined. The next year, 66, we moved into the building. In 67, Mordecai Kaplan came. [...]. I joined because we felt that we had a message for the Jewish community. That you could be a good Jew without believing in a supernatural God; and that Jews are not the chosen people. You could mix with the non-Jewish community ... so having been out, working in the non-Jewish community, all of these mythologies that had been inflicted on us, no longer had any power over us.

Before I knew there was such a thing, I was a Reconstructionist, I felt that way. If I hadn't found Reconstructionism – if I hadn't found Kaplan – I don't know that I would have remained so involved.

For Kay Wolofsky, the issues were not quite as intense as they were for Jack, but she too was delighted to have found a kind of Judaism she could live with:

I thought I could live with this kind of Judaism. I couldn't live with the kind of Orthodox Judaism that was practiced by mummy and daddy. I didn't feel like I could really live with the Temple Emanuel, although it's changed. Temple is not like it used to be with the high hats, the Anglicization, the formality—I couldn't live with that, I couldn't live with the Shaar Hashomayim, I could no longer live with men and women having separate seating. And this was such a good compromise. The *chosen-ness* had always bothered me. If you're sceptical, and agnostic, you're going to wonder, well who the heck is going to do the choosing ... And then after World War II, how could we even think in terms of chosen-ness?? I had these questions myself, but Jack helped me bring them to the fore.

[...] and then, there wasn't anything else like that around. It was really, on a very prosaic basic person-to-person level ... *the guys and the girls could sit together!* That was really, really neat, to be sitting together with your husband and your kid, and the bigger kid, etc. etc., very nice.

VII.1.5 Reconstructionism à la Lavy; Kaplan and the Reconstructionist Conventions

Jack Wolofsky and his wife Kay became engaged, enthusiastic members of Lavy's shul and participants in the community. Their three children celebrated their bar and bat mitzvahs at the shul with creative services and Kay was the first Chair of the Youth Group committee.⁴¹⁰ Jack served as synagogue President after the shul expansion, from 1981-83. He was also *parnass*, together with Herb Horwich, a role he fulfilled with inimitable warmth.

At first, in Jack's words, they were "practicing Reconstructionism à la Lavy Becker." The Wolofskys hadn't yet met Kaplan but for Jack, the Reconstructionist ideas as Lavy Becker expressed and demonstrated them, were profoundly liberating:

[Reconstructionism] answered my ... it gave me the ability to be a Jew, without having to commit myself to what I felt was archaic thought.

The Reconstructionist convention held in Montreal in 1967 was the first the Wolofskys attended. Jack remembers the thrill of discovering a "creative service" for the first time:

By the way in 67, was the first time I attended a Reconstructionist convention. You had this feeling of excitement ... that was when it was decided to have a Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. That was the first time I saw a creative service, my friend Manny Goldsmith. He did a phenomenal creative service on Friday night, with poetry ... and eliminated 50 percent of the traditional prayers. He included Yiddish poetry, English poetry, Hebrew poetry. Again, I had a new sense of peoplehood, of culture. I was introduced to Kaplanian thought.

After 1967, the Wolofskys attended a series of conventions, events that were highlights of these years and indeed of their lives. Kay Wolofsky's memories of these events are effervescent:

What I think might be of interest to you is our earliest trips to Reconstructionist Conventions. They were ... there are no words to describe the excitement, the

⁴¹⁰ Vol 1. No. 1 Nov. 14, 1968, the first edition of the Synagogue Bulletin, includes under "Milestones" an announcement of Lawrence Wolofsky bar mitzvah. Further, the Jewish Public Library Archives (boxes on *Dorshai Emet*) include a copy of the supplementary readings from Brian Wolofsky's bar mitzvah on October 12, 1974. The introduction to these readings reflect the Wolofskys' engagement with and excitement about the Reconstructionist project: "These readings are intended as additional material to the Reconstructionist *siddur*. When edited in 1948, our *siddur* was avant-garde in that it recognized that creative prayer did not end with the writings of Maimonides.... It is hoped that these pages will serve as a challenge to others - to collect and collate those writings which can be an incentive for us all to live a fuller life as Jews and members of the society of man."

intellectual happenings. Being in the presence of Rabbi Kaplan, knowing you're in the presence of Rabbi Kaplan. You felt his greatness. No ifs, ands, buts or maybes. You were in the presence of an elderly person who was a leader, who had opinions that you said Wow, these are great opinions! ... His turn of phrase ... I've never till this day met anybody like him who could pick up on something and say something, that was both brilliant, and funny. And have you thinking, and laughing, at the same time.

It was a privilege to have known Kaplan. It was one of my life's privileges to have known him and to have him know me. This is what characterized him, this drive, this passion. He was definitely a man driven ... he had very clear goals. He was crystal-clear until very close to 100 or 101. He kept writing, and he knew his Tanach, 'You want an answer, go to chapter xyz of Isaiah or whatever, and you're going to find the answer there.' He literally had an encyclopaedic brain [...]

I think the first time was at Camp Cejwin, I think it was 1967. One of my memories of that convention, a very strong memory, was a tree. A *huge* tree, and my thought was, how many growing areas south of Montreal can we be? And what kind of a tree is this? It was *enormous*, it was *gigantic*, and it was *symmetrical*. It was a perfect circle. It had grown into maybe a cone shape, it was narrower on the top, and it had a large trunk. People would sit under it. I get tearful when I think about it. And it was in *bloom!* We had to find someone to ask, and it was a *mulberry* tree. I don't think we have them in this growing area. It blooms every *seven* years, and it blooms for *a week* or something. And it bloomed for us! This was the time! [...] that mulberry tree just symbolized everything.⁴¹¹

The Wolofskys were very much involved with the Reconstructionist movement, attending conventions and supporting the Rabbinical College. However, things shifted when they started to feel pressured to donate more than they were able to, as Kay remembers:

When we lost "gut affiliation," which I think is a decent way to put it, was when the Reconstructionist movement moved into the lovely mansion they're in now, and they were desperate for funds. These were US funds. Montrealers were earning in Canadian dollars, little minuscule Canadian dollars compared to the big fat American dollars, so that every hundred dollars you gave was piddling. It was just that we were feeling [...] when the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College went from its modest, smaller building, to this lovely mansion in Philadelphia, they had to start fund-raising and matching grants and all this kind of shtick, that is part of Fundraising 101 ... you know, if you're going to fund raise, you've got to go out and do it!⁴¹²

The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College move into new premises took place in September, 1982. Despite their loss of "gut affiliation" the Wolofskys continued to stay abreast of developments, and Jack continued to argue in that context, as he did within the shul

⁴¹¹ Interview by author, 22 June 2001.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*

community, for the value of Mordecai Kaplan's legacy of dissent, of ethics and of rationality within Judaism and the need to investigate and renew this legacy on an ongoing basis.

VII.1.6 Dialogue

In 1976, Quebec elected its first Separatist government. Many in Montreal's anglophone community, and certainly in the Jewish community, were acutely uncomfortable. Jack Wolofsky stands out by contrast for his openness to the French Canadian reality and his engagement in dialogue initiatives. Openness to French Canadians started early and was rooted in positive childhood experiences:

In our country house, as a kid, growing up, I loved to be on the farm. We were right next to a farm. It was a Jewish farmer who owned it, but he had a lot of French Canadians working there. I used to get on the wagons with them, and go around the lake, delivering wood, or milking the cows with them. So I have a love for these people: they took care of me, they watched me, they said, 'Don't sit here, be careful, don't move around, you might fall off, that's too hard for you to do ... 'They talked to me in French, English, a mix ... and I had to learn French. But I had a love, for Arcand, for Denis, Stanislas, for Vendette, these people knew me. Every year, they'd see me growing up. They were warm and friendly, there was a love, a positive feeling.

However, this love and positive feeling were subject to the complexity of other realities, since Jack Wolofsky grew up amidst the anti-Semitic attitudes that circulated prior to The Second World War. As is characteristic of Jack, his belief in the value of "reaching out" is deeply felt and is something he traces back as a conscious value to his first experiences with Lavy Becker and also with Stephen Barber. Here too, Lavy's shul and Reconstructionism offered Jack Wolofsky a framework within which to blossom as a "good Jew":

In 1967, Lavy served on a Canada-wide interfaith committee for the Centennial. They produced a book [the Centennial Prayer Anthology, cited above] I was very impressed by this. I was also very impressed by Stephen Barber. I had a tremendous respect for Stephen Barber. My first experience with him was when I was a member, for a year, of the St. James Literary Society. Stephen was one of the speakers, and then of course I met Stephen here at the synagogue and I got to

know him. Stephen was involved with interfaith meetings.⁴¹³ He met with the rectors of the francophone universities. And I saw Lavy mixing with these people. I realised that you can mix. You can be a good Jew and still do these things. These things left an impression on me and I said to myself, I've got to reach out.

I tried it with René Lévesque. I met René Lévesque in 1962. At that time he was a minister in Lesage's government, "L'équipe du tonnerre." That was Eric Kierans, René Lévesque, and Paul-Gérin Lajoie. Gérin-Lajoie was reforming the whole school system. Kierans was doing social welfare and health and Lévesque was doing energy, Hydro-Québec. Lévesque asked me a question, because his mother was visiting in Israel at the time. He said, 'My mother's in Israel. You have a country (which was, at that time 2 million people.) How can you have a country of 2 million people and here we are a nation of 5 million, 6 million people and we are not a country. Why can't Québec be a separate country?' [...] I didn't know what he was driving at. This was a new thing.

I met him a few weeks later on Darlington, coming out of the delicatessen and I said to him, 'You know I'm really interested in helping to build the greater Québec.' ... Québec was just coming out of the Duplessis era. He said to me, 'We'll call on you.' He never did call on me, but that's beside the point. [...] I wanted to get involved in the Québec scene, in the total ethos of Québec.

In using the word "ethos" Jack Wolofsky is using Kaplan's vocabulary, one of the holistic terms Kaplan incorporated from his studies in sociology and used in his writings. In this instance as in others for Jack, core elements of meaning in his life find expression through Reconstructionist concepts. In the case of reaching out to René Lévesque in 1962, Wolofsky was making a move towards "mixing" that came naturally to him at that stage, but that had remained a source of some discomfort. Meeting Lavy Becker and his Reconstructionist group legitimized and affirmed what Jack Wolofsky was already doing.

In 1980, the year in which Quebec held its first Referendum on sovereignty, Jack found his connection to the "total ethos of Quebec" in an unexpected manner. Circumstance had it that he crossed paths with Pierre Anctil, then a young scholar and an anomaly: a French Canadian who had become fascinated with Jewish life and who was studying Yiddish and Hebrew in order to have access to source materials:

⁴¹³ In her interview, Anna Barber speaks of her father being involved with, *Les amitiés culturelles Canada-français—Israël* and the *Cercle du roi David*, see Chapter 4 above. See also documentation in the Stephen Barber Fonds: MG 31, H 113, National Library of Canada.

It was 1980; I was at the Y, having lunch. Pierre was at the Y, having lunch. We happened to be sitting at the same table, which had dividers on it. And he was doing *dikduk*, Hebrew language grammar. Here's a man in his late 20s, I said something to him like, 'Here's somebody studying Hebrew, I wish I could find the time to do that!' He answered me, 'Yes, I'm studying Hebrew.' So I could tell something from his accent. I didn't have the nerve to say are you French Canadian, I said, 'Are you Sephardic?' He said, 'No, I'm a French Canadian.' So, we struck up a conversation and the rapport was immediate.

In the early days of the Wolofsky-Ancil friendship, the Reconstructionist Synagogue was growing, but still "homey." Jack and Pierre spent hours talking about "the Quebec ethos" and Jews. Jack found ways to include the congregation of the shul in the conversation and then to extend the audience to the dialogue group "Dialogue St.-Urbain":

And then, what I did ... we used to do this, when there were less congregants, and also, when there was more of a feeling of *hemschaft*: we'd have a Reconstructionist day at my country house, and I'd bring out a speaker. I invited Pierre to come. He came out and spoke. He asked me, 'How are you related to Hirsch Wolofsky?' So we spoke about the Keneder Odler. We had about 80 people on my front lawn. He spoke, and talked about his journey until that point in his life. It was very pleasant. We became very close friends. We invited him to our *seders*. He and I used to get into these ... hours and hours and hours ... I would take him home and we would sit in the car and talk outside his house ... on the whole question of Québec identity. I said 'Pierre, I can't be part of that.' He said, 'Why can't you?' I said, 'It's just not right, I don't see it as being democratic.' He said, 'It's collective rights as opposed to individual rights.' I said, 'No, you cannot have collective rights which diminish the value of the individual.' We would have these very long arguments. I said, 'You know, Pierre, it's okay for you and me to have these arguments, but we need to get out into the wider community.'

So Pierre called me one day and said, 'I have two more people who are interested in this.' It was Jacques Langlais, who was at the Centre Monchainin and Hy Goldman. So we met, and we had our first meeting of Dialogue St. Urbain. We didn't call it that. Then Pierre, Hy, Jacques, met at my house, to continue the process. We started calling ourselves Dialogue St. Urbain. One day Jacques called me, a few years later and said, 'Où est-ce qu'on a pris le nom Dialogue St-Urbain?' I said, 'Je ne sais pas, mais c'est parce que notre première réunion était sur la rue St-Urbain, et aussi à cause de St. Urbain's Horsemen ... et Richler écrit toujours sur St-Urbain, so, pourquoi pas ...!'

As the Reconstructionist Synagogue, renamed "Dorshei Emet" (Seekers of Truth) in 1977, continued to grow, new elements came to the fore and Jack Wolofsky was not able to have his dialogue initiatives be as much a part of shul life as he might have liked. For one thing, Ron Aigen was from the United States and did not speak French. Further, with the immense

challenges facing him as a young rabbi, at a time when French and English were being increasingly polarized, the incentives for making French-language learning and outreach a priority were low.

* * *

As the congregation continued to grow and change, Jack Wolofsky would eventually have to fight, at times unsuccessfully, to have his voice heard and his arguments appreciated. Nonetheless, certainly in the first phase of the new shul he played key roles. Even after his term as President (1981-83) and when he was no longer officially *parnass*, Jack continued for many years to stand near the door on Saturday mornings, welcoming people. Many a newcomer had, as their first experience of the Reconstructionist community in Montreal, the experience of a gentle hand on the shoulder accompanied by the genuine warmth and sincere interest of a Jack Wolofsky greeting. In his interview with Barry Lazar, Wolofsky identified this process in answer to a question about what advice he, as a former shul President, would like to give to future Presidents:

One important experience is the warmth that has radiated in our synagogue over the years. That cannot be allowed to die. When someone comes they must be made to feel that they are part of that synagogue, that they are wanted in that synagogue, that they belong. Because first comes belonging and then believing. But you must belong first. You must feel you belong in that group. That experience, that warmth must be radiated in each one of our members so that anyone who walks in is invited to a *Kiddush*, is made to feel, 'Glad to see you here, hello, come on in!' That is what Herb and I felt strongly when we were *parnassim*. We were there to greet someone who walked into that shul on a Shabbat or on *yom toivim*. This is what I felt: I became a member because I was invited in, because I was welcome, no one asked me for a ticket when I came in on *Yom Kippur*. I was welcomed and I was asked to come in and sit down.⁴¹⁴

Carrying forward the value of warmth and genuine welcome that Jack Wolofsky embodied, as did many others in the original community at Lavy's shul, was indeed to prove a central

⁴¹⁴ Interview with Barry Lazar, October 8, 1985.

challenge in the new era. The young man to whom this challenge would fall was Ron Aigen, a recent graduate of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College when he was hired in the summer of 1976.

VII.2 A Kid with a Backpack and a Guitar: The New Rabbi

Once the decision to hire a full-time rabbi had been taken, a committee was struck and a search process initiated, focusing on graduates of the RRC. These graduates were young Americans, a number of whom had enrolled in divinity school as a draft dodge. In his 1970 article on Reconstructionism in *American Jewish Life*, Charles Liebman suggested that in fact draft-related motivations were common among the early applicants to the RRC:

Not all, perhaps not even most, of the students who enrolled in the college did so in order to prepare for rabbinical ordination. Many enrolled in order to receive draft deferments as divinity students.⁴¹⁵

In the case of Ron Aigen, the young man the Reconstructionist Synagogue community chose, what began as a way to defer the draft became a vocation. In the end, the decision to hire Ron Aigen was an easy one, as Barbara Kay, shul Vice President at the time, remembers:

It was at my house actually that Ron was hired, by the way. That was when I was the VP and we were interviewing him. We'd already liked him on paper [...] We had a buffet dinner at my house I remember, one of those lox and bagel affairs. We were in a very small house on Dufferin road. And he came with his backpack, he had just graduated from the College. He was young! I think I was 32, he was maybe 27 or something like that. And he came, we were charmed by him of course, and we sat around, talking about the shul's needs, what the people were like, etc. and then at the end of the evening we all stood up. In our minds we didn't even have to ... it was a *fait accompli*. At the end of the evening, I remember him saying, "Well, um, does this mean I'm hired?" Because nobody said, formally, anything, but I think we just felt the feeling was so right. And then I became Ron's guide ... I helped him buy furniture. We were good friends. He wanted to meet somebody, I was trying to find girls for him to go out with. [...] I helped him set up his apartment. We had the same sense of humour, we were always laughing at the same things, we watched the same silly TV programs.

[...] [Then there was] the whole notion of the *havurah*; Lavy was happy with the shul, but the minute Ron came in, he started talking about *havurah* because his generation, that was their thing ...⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁵ Liebman, Charles. "Reconstructionism in American Jewish Life." *American Jewish Year Book* (1970) 253.

In hiring Ron Aigen, a young graduate of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, the community was, deliberately or not, doing more than simply lending Lavy Becker a hand: it was crossing a cultural threshold into a new generation. It was involving itself with the dreams, visions, needs and priorities of the baby boomers, as well as with the new wave in the Reconstructionist movement.

A reflection on the early graduates of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College appeared in the Winter 1998-99 issue of *Reconstructionism Today*, in the form of a memoir entitled “We were all children of our times,” written by David Brusin, a student in the first class at the RRC:

We were all children of our times. In varying degrees for each, our long hair, our experimentation with marijuana and LSD, our passionate involvement in anti-Vietnam War protests, our unwavering commitment to the civil rights movement, expressed a growing alienation from the establishment and a shared conviction that American values and culture were, and ought to be, in transition.⁴¹⁷

Warm and enthusiastic but also thoughtful and quietly conservative by nature, Ron Aigen would not have been among the wilder experimenters described by Brusin. That he was nonetheless seen by the older members of the shul community as a typical representative of his generation comes across in Herb Winer’s characterization of him as “a kid with a backpack and a guitar.” Herb Winer also highlights the exceptional warmth and generosity of spirit with which Lavy Becker welcomed the new rabbi—a continuation, perhaps of the warm and loving father-son relationship Becker had enjoyed with his two “fathers”, his own parent, and Mordecai Kaplan:

There was Ron as a very capable young kid from the RRC with a backpack and a guitar And he learned! As I said last night, he learned leadership from a leader! And it was a wonderful transition. Lavy didn’t resent [the newcomer], he was generous with his time and with his skills ... I could see enough of the two of them working together to see that it wasn’t a question of Lavy resenting this young kid coming in and taking over “my shul.” It was never that. He knew in the 1970s that, like almost all of us, he wasn’t going to live forever ... and that the job

⁴¹⁶ Interview by author, 7 July 2004.

⁴¹⁷ Cited in Caplan, *From Ideology to Liturgy*. p. 136, note 56.

of a responsible rabbi was to bring in a competent successor and train him, and he did that. In the last 10 or 15 years, Lavy's physical and mental powers decayed very gradually, but they did. But he was helped in his ageing in knowing that Ron was growing into the job. There was not the slightest hint of rivalry. It's certainly not universally the case.⁴¹⁸

As warm and welcoming as the shul was to the new rabbi, it did pose real challenges as well, among them the need to keep the level of discussion high, as Barbara Kay remembers:

[The] people who [were] academics, professionals and all [...] at that time [...] represented maybe half the congregation, instead of a tenth as they probably do now. So, the discussions were at quite a high level. Ron had to be on his toes a lot. He knows his stuff, and he's a rabbi after all, but he was up against people who were really, really quite advanced scholars, very articulate.

Equally challenging was the political scene, which changed dramatically soon after Ron Aigen arrived. Donnie Frank recalls that there was a meeting at the synagogue at the time when the 1976 election results were being announced:

I remember. I remember sitting in a meeting. We had some sort of Board meeting or synagogue meeting. People had their radios to their ears. I remember sitting in the synagogue, and people's faces blanching, and people getting up to leave, to go home. People were very upset, and they had to be with their families, or whatever. Or perhaps the meeting ended, or the news came up as the meeting was ending. Ron standing in the synagogue saying "I just got here! Don't leave me!"

I think there wasn't so much openness [to the French Canadian reality] on our part at that time. There was an awful lot of fear. Signs went up on people's lawns the next day that they wanted to sell their houses, and nobody knew [what the future held]. I don't think people could have predicted what was in store 25 years later. Barry would say all the time, "They may not have won this time, but they'll eventually win. ..."

I think that we were, in the Jewish community, and the synagogue no differently, probably like a herd of buffalo, turning our backs to the outside world in order to protect our babies. To protect "our stuff."⁴¹⁹

The shift in attitude that Donnie Frank remarked on is significant. Turning inward was the opposite of the outward-looking openness that was a trademark of Donnie's father, Lavy Becker, but times had changed. The next era in the growth of the Reconstructionist Synagogue would see the community grow and evolve to the rhythm of the baby boomers' life cycle as the new rabbi "met someone", married and had children.

⁴¹⁸ Herb Winer, interview by author, 7 December 2001.

⁴¹⁹ Donnie Frank, interview by author, 10 February 2003.

VII.3 Coda: Community, Values, Fulfillment

The final section in this portrait of Montreal's Reconstructionist Synagogue turns back to Lavy Becker. As essential as the particular people who formed the shul's core membership were to determining the quality and character of community life, and as critical as the specific moment in time, peaking in 1967 was, the community would not have existed at all if not for Lavy Becker, whose values, intelligence and love permeated the group. The material that follows focuses first on the word "fulfillment" a term that carried particular meaning for Lavy Becker, expressing a sense of the ultimate in human life. This is followed by a small vignette drawn from a book launch I attended, where the downtown immigrant community had gathered. Here I was able to see Becker amongst his peers, by then towards the ends of their lives and to appreciate the extent to which the values that had guided Lavy Becker were owed to a shared generational set of memories and sense of identity. The last word will go to Lavy Becker himself.

* * *

In 1996, when he had been retired from his position as "honorary rabbi" for 20 years, Lavy Becker responded to a question about what he would consider his important accomplishments at the shul by introducing the term "fulfillment" and linking it to community, saying "[at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College] In Philadelphia we were asked this question [about important achievements]. I used the word *fulfillment* because I feel it very deeply." This term was also central in the interview I had with Lavy Becker in 1999, about the synagogue community he had created. The following passage demonstrates the importance Becker placed on making it possible for Jews to *enjoy* the practice of their Judaism:

I don't really want to talk about myself [...] My part had its role in the earlier days of the synagogue: when they leaned on me, I made myself available. I helped them to realize that through the synagogue people could express

themselves. And they did. They came to shul, they enjoyed the singing. They felt that they were carrying on a tradition. And it worked. They were enjoying themselves. They were fulfilling themselves.

Iris Wagner's film biography *The Lovingkindness of Lavy Becker* includes a beautiful moment at the Negev dinner given to honour Lavy Becker in 1988, in which Becker quotes a passage by Ahad Ha-Am that is a lovely articulation of Becker's own philosophy and that again rises to a climax in the word fulfillment:

I live for the sake of the member, the colleague. I die to make way for new individuals, who will mould the community afresh and not allow it to stagnate and remain in one position. When the individual thus values the community as his own life and strives after its happiness as though it were his individual wellbeing, he finds satisfaction, he achieves fulfillment

At the same dinner, we hear Lavy Becker in open, expansive mood, expressing his happiness at the presence of his three great grandchildren in the room and his hope that they too may come to know the satisfaction of serving their community:

... so far, this family has produced three great grandchildren and yes I have hopes that they too will look for fulfillment in a communal way. If I sound as if I was boasting a little, I would admit to it. They are wonderful, they are here, and they give me joy, and I wish on every *zayde* in this room, in this community, the same.

* * *

Lavy Becker lived his life guided by an ethic of community service, an ethic that was shared by others of his generation and background. An expression of this ethic in the heart of the community itself was in evidence at a book launch in the spring of 1999 at the Cote St. Luc Library, for a book by Joel Yanofsky entitled *Architect of a Community: The Manny Batshaw Story*.⁴²⁰ The room was overfull, people crowding at the doorway and spilling out into the library beyond. Many, many community leaders were present, including Cote St. Luc Mayor Robert Libman, his predecessor Mayor Bernard Lang and the Israeli Consul, but the feeling was homey and informal, the proceedings peppered with jokes in Yiddish.

⁴²⁰ Manuel G. Batshaw had a full and distinguished career as a social worker and community leader, including chairing the "Batshaw Committee", which investigated Quebec's Juvenile Centres. His brother Harry was the first Jew to be appointed to Quebec Superior Court in 1950, the first Jew to be named to a High Court in Canada.

Manny Batshaw's presentation began: "This is like a typical Workmen's Circle meeting where the speaker says, before I speak I'd like to say a few words" The core of Batshaw's speech was structured around three themes: Immigrants, Personal Development and Community, and each theme was anchored by a quotation. The central message about immigration was: "My grandparents and your grandparents came from the *shtetl* determined to succeed. They arrived with nothing, they worked hard to assure advancement for their children. They survived pogroms in Europe, two world wars, the Holocaust, and they saw the creation of the State of Israel. The success of our parents and grandparents is evident in all of us ... This book is a tribute to them."

On the subject of personal development, Batshaw again tied his sense of community service to the merits of his parents and their ethics: "I always felt that I was born with a purpose and that purpose was to help others. Perhaps we share that, this was the purpose of most of our parents...."

The subject of community was illustrated with a quotation from Elie Wiesel, linking the identity of the individual Jew with the inheritance of the ancestors and with community. "Alone, a Jew is nothing, but if he is with other Jews, he is a force because then, automatically, he inherits all the strengths and all the tears and all the despairs and all the joys of his ancestors."

Lavy Becker, frail but very present at 94, and his son Hillel stood towards the back, side by side, smiling from ear to ear. During the course of the event, most of the important leaders present were recognized by name and appreciated for their service to the community. It was pointed out that Lavy and Hillel were the only two members of one family to get the Canadian Jewish community's most prestigious service award, the Bronfman medal. The sense in the

room was powerful that this community had done well, not only materially but also in terms of nurturing and bringing to fruition their parents' dreams of Jewish continuity and successful adaptation to the new country. In doing so they had also contributed significantly to their society in Montreal, Quebec and Canada, helping to make it a better place for their children to live as Jews and as citizens.

* * *

“Beginnings, Memories, Bar Mitzvah,” the booklet that the shul community put together in honour of its own coming of age was not actually produced in 1973, the congregation’s 13th year. By the time the series of excellent articles it contains had been written, assembled and produced it was 1975, the year before Lavy Becker would step aside. The last piece in the booklet is a message from Lavy Becker, written in response to the community’s request that he say something to them on this occasion. No doubt aware that he would not be the shul’s Honorary Rabbi for much longer, Becker chose to make his message a “declaration of love,” love for his parents and what they had given him, for Mordecai Kaplan, for Judaism and for the shul community. This declaration is given here in full as a fitting way to finish this portrait of “Lavy’s Shul” (the Yiddish and Hebrew words in italics are explained in a footnote).

I have been asked to write a message. Since I have been “sending messages” to the congregation for 15 years, I would prefer now to reminisce, to declare my love.

I love our Jewish tradition.

My father, mother too, of course, *zichronom livracha*, got me started and kept me going for 20 years. Ours was a beautiful Jewish home – calm, harmonious, respectful, intelligent, learned. *Shabbosim* and *Yomim Tovim* were joyfully anticipated and happily, *halakhically* observed.

I still smell mother’s *challah* and *milchike bulkes*, to say little about her *Succos teiglach* and *Pesadike chremzlach*. The basso profundo of father, transmitted in lesser quality to his sons, led us in *Kiddush*, *zemiros*, *bentschen*, as we harmonized

with him in fact and spirit. Joining him in shul was always a privilege. I remember his waking me *Shabbos* mornings to say “Lavy, *ich gay in shul,*” obviously wanting me to join him, but not imposing it. The pattern was established, and I loved it.

When I was 14, they responded to my whim to study at the *yeshiva* in New York, although, at home, it made necessary drastic economies, which, being young, I did not understand. It was just as well. Those two years among my peers, similarly motivated, carried me over the hump of teen-age rebellion and strengthened my natural acceptance of a full Jewish way of life and my love of the tradition.

Then came four years at McGill, still my “father’s boy,” with two sets of friends, one reserved for *Shabbos*. With the latter I helped to found Young Israel Synagogue. Not yet 17, I was its first president. It was good for me. The synagogue, Young Judea, Maccabean Circle on campus and that same beautiful Jewish home were all happy associations for me. Jewish was beautiful.

How natural that I should choose to enter the rabbinate. All the professors at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York examined me for my knowledge. Except Mordecai Kaplan, who probed my mind. *They* wanted to know what I was “stuffed” with. *He* wanted to know whether I could do anything with the “stuffing.”

Then the fun began. He taught me, for the first time in my life, that analyzing, examining, understanding, delineating would strengthen my Jewishness. He exposed me to new ideas, new interpretations. I learned more, I understood more clearly and loved it even more. My father started it. Kaplan enhanced it. He made me want to shout from the housetops how beautiful Judaism was. In effect I did, whether as rabbi, social worker or *baal-a-bos*, beginning a home.

Augusta comes from a home quite like mine. Her parents were just as learned, just as joyfully *frum* and just as effective. How easy it therefore was for us, together, to re-create in our own home what we found so meaningful in our parents’ homes. The process continues. Our children have blessed us in many ways, including the re-creation in their homes of what they found beautiful in ours. And so it should be.

And this brings me to you.

Where ever we lived – New York, Detroit, New Haven, Boston, Montreal – the desire to go to *shul* never dimmed. I loved it even if I did see some of the

inadequacies. I squirmed, I criticized, I recommended, I was frustrated. The time had come when I simply had to make the effort to build an acceptable synagogue format. I had to find a way of transmitting to others a love of tradition as I had to my children.

You responded. Together we have learned to love the synagogue, its aesthetics, the informality, the learning, the creativity, the participation, the harmony, the sense of family, the tradition.

You know what else? I have come to love you: warm, mellow, mature, intelligent, responsive, responsible, beautiful people, wonderful Jews. Be blessed.⁴²¹

⁴²¹ *zichronom livracha* (Heb) May their memory be blessed; *Shabbosim* (Heb) Sabbaths; *Yomim Tovim* (Heb) Jewish holidays; *halakhtically* (Heb) in accordance with Jewish law; *challah* (Heb) bread traditionally served on the Sabbath and holidays; *milchike bulkes* (Yid) dairy bread rolls; *Succas* (Heb) Feast of Tabernacles or Booths *teiglach* (Yid) small pastries boiled in honey syrup; *Pesadike chromzlach* (Yid) Kosher for Passover stuffed fritters; *Kiddush* (Heb) Blessing over wine and bread said on Sabbaths and holidays; *zemiras* (Heb) Songs traditionally sung after dinner; *bentschen* (Yid) Grace said after meals; *Shabbos* (Heb) Sabbath; *ich gay in schul* (I'm going to synagogue); *yeshiva* (Heb) Jewish religious school; *baal-a-bos* (Heb) Master of the household; *frum* (Yid) Orthodox, pious.

Chapter Eight

VIII Conclusions

This dissertation has created a portrait of a singular community in the context of its time. In order to achieve this complex task, it has employed an interdisciplinary approach, borrowing elements from history and ethnography in an adaptation of the methodology called “Portraiture.” This concluding section will review the results of this work and the ongoing questions it raises. A few broad comments on what the study has shown are followed by an eight-point list of the major specific findings and a few more general reflections. This is followed by suggested directions for further research.

Overall, this study has contributed to an understanding of the trajectory from immigration to integration for immigrant Jews in Canada in the period following the Second World War. The microcosm of the shul community has reflected a larger Jewish world in flux and also a Canada in the process of separating from its colonial roots and structuring a new identity. Lavy Becker’s life path and those of the other members profiled here have provided an example of how “integration” was really a two-way relationship, in which the immigrants helped to shape Canada’s new multi-cultural identity. This study of Montreal’s Reconstructionist Synagogue has also provided a snapshot of an important time in the Reconstructionist movement, years during which Mordecai Kaplan and Ira Eisenstein were still active and engaged in the pivotal challenge of founding a Rabbinical College. Finally, the study has given an example of Jewish community in action, where tradition and innovation found a working balance that invigorated and renewed Jewish identity for the participants. The following eight points articulate in more detail the specific elements found here to characterize “Lavy’s Shul” and comment on their significance.

VIII.1 Findings

1. To study Montreal's Reconstructionist Synagogue is to come to appreciate the centrality of Lavy Becker to it. Becker was motivated to start this community because he loved synagogue life and wanted to create an environment where he could perpetuate the beauty of the Jewish tradition he had grown up with and also foster the freedom to think, analyze and experiment that he had learned from Mordecai Kaplan. His strong motivation to create a community where he could be at home was equalled by his desire to offer something different to Montreal Jews, a way for the disaffected to reconnect with Judaism. It was Becker's commitment to and involvement with Jewish life together with his unique personality, charisma and love that brought the community into being and made it what it was. Lavy Becker's life and work demonstrate the creativity and effectiveness a single individual could embody during these years and the kind of leadership that helped to structure a new multi-cultural Canada.
2. Notwithstanding the centrality of Lavy Becker, the community depended for its character and functioning on its members. Lavy Becker's absences, both his winter stays in Florida and his travels for the World Jewish Congress, created a need for people to step in and take over. The core group who were attracted to Becker's experiment were educated and cultured individuals who had a range of skills, talents, interests and professional expertise that they contributed to the life and running of the shul. The people who joined Becker indicated by their choice of his synagogue experiment that the existing options for involvement and affiliation were not satisfactory to a particular segment of the Jewish population at that time. These were people for the most part who had Jewish backgrounds but whose sense of gender equality, or whose disenchantment with what they understood

- to be the irrational aspects of their religion had caused them to turn away or who, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, could not entertain the notion of “Judaism as usual.”
3. Although “Lavy’s Shul” was clearly a synagogue, it was also characterized by the informality and intimacy of the *havurah*. This informal style was deliberate, since the community was reacting against the large and showy *shuls* that had become a feature of post-war Jewish life. Lavy Becker’s role as “honorary” rabbi contributed to the sense that this was a group of peers where everyone pitched in, as expressed in the group’s self-chosen nickname, the “do-it-yourself” community. The fact that the community chose this nickname, which echoed the philosophy of the then groundbreaking counter-culture *Whole Earth Catalog*, is one indication that these Jews, many from immigrant backgrounds, were tuned in to and part of new cultural trends.
 4. The fact that Mordecai Kaplan and the Eisensteins, Ira and Judith, were active during the “Lavy’s Shul” era was one of the defining features of life in the community. Kaplan’s occasional visits and those of the Eisensteins helped to keep Reconstructionist thought alive, and connected the shul directly to the passion that animated the movement and the ideas that drove it at a pivotal period. In fact, “Lavy’s Shul” may be seen as an exemplary instance of what was happening in the Reconstructionist movement during these years.
 5. The character of life in Montreal’s Reconstructionist Synagogue was clearly affected by its moment in time, between 1960 and 1976. For Jews everywhere, the tensions in the Middle East that preceded the Six-Day War in Israel and then the seemingly miraculous victory there represented defining moments of identity. For Canadian Jews generally, and for Montrealers in particular, an added layer of meaning came with their involvement as Canadians in the Centennial celebrations and Expo 67. The openness of this moment and

its sense of possibility, epitomized by the effervescent success of Expo, became part of the spirit of shul life. The fact that Lavy Becker played an important role in the Centennial celebrations as Chair of the Interfaith Conference and that he was able to arrange the synagogue dedication ceremonies to coincide with Expo and with the 8th Annual Reconstructionist Convention all imparted further prestige and recognition to the community and engendered a sense of pride.

6. One overall characteristic of the synagogue community was a “lively hybridity.” Generationally the shul combined the maturity and rich diversity of memory of its members with the spirit of experiment of the sixties. Institutionally, a *havurah*/synagogue hybridity was beautifully expressed in the unique synagogue building the community designed and constructed. Further, the shul’s cultural hybridity was exemplified in the area of women and gender, where the women’s group were decorous “ladies” and also ground-breakers in giving women *aliyot* and bat mitzvahs. The very real and lively contradictory elements involved here offer a look at how a collection of strong women negotiated their comfort levels and their values together with the men around issues that were and are central to modern and post-modern Jewish identity.
7. A second overall characteristic of “Lavy’s Shul” was the unique culture of conversation it developed. The post-Holocaust silence that prevailed in other places in Canada at this period was not part of the community and people were not afraid to talk about these things. The open climate that resulted meant that issues of concern to the community, including both Jewish affairs and more general ethical, social and political topics of the hour were discussed. People grappled with meaning by discussing, talking and listening to and with each other and with invited guests and so the community became a hub of meaning in their lives.

8. The success of Lavy Becker's Canadian experiment in Reconstructionism nuances the prevailing idea that Reconstructionism, as the only wholly "made-in-America" denomination, is a phenomenon connected almost exclusively to the United States. As Becker's life work demonstrates, Canada proved to be fertile ground for implementing Kaplan's goal of "living in two civilizations." Becker's commitment to exemplifying a life lived openly and joyfully as a Jew and a Canadian created a model deserving of recognition.

In addition to these findings, the material presented herein gives rise to reflection on three further points having to do both with the content of the study and with its methodology.

1. With respect to method, as Fenwick English has pointed out (see Footnote 12 above), "Portraiture" is not a succinctly defined set of procedures. Rather, it is an approach that contains many useful guidelines and vivid examples, which each researcher must adapt and work with based on her personality, specific interests and chosen subject. In this case, given the complexity of the subject, such a flexible approach was entirely appropriate and supported the initial intention of creating a richly textured portrait of an intriguing Jewish community.
2. As stated in the Introduction to this dissertation, the genesis of the present study lay in my desire to understand what it was that appeared to be "slipping away" as Lavy Becker's generation gave way to the baby boomers. A question naturally arises now as to whether any understanding of this general point has been achieved. The simple answer is, that it has. Reflecting on the portrait just presented, it seems clear that one definitive factor is the fact that Lavy Becker's generation had its roots in worlds that had ceased to exist by the time the baby boom generation came along. The living memory of these worlds, whether of Montreal's downtown immigrant ghetto or of the Jewish communities of pre-

Holocaust Europe, that so enriched the texture of conversation in Lavy's Shul, would be extinguished with the passing of this generation. In this connection, the following is interesting.

I have been struck by the fact that Barbara Meyerhoff and Arnold Eisen, both scholars of my generation, chose to highlight in their very different books, *Number Our Days* (1978) and *Rethinking Modern Judaism* (1998), the same story about the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples. The story has to do with a ritual the Hasidic master performed in order to avert crises, involving going to a special place in the woods, lighting a fire and saying a prayer. The story explains how in each of the succeeding generations of disciples, part of the ritual was lost, until in the fourth generation the place in the woods was gone from memory, as was the way to light the fire and the words of the prayer. All that remained was the story. Both Meyerhoff's and Eisen's use of this tale assumes that its message, the presence of a fuller truth in past generations and its fading, applies to where we are today, and both communicate a kind of poignancy through their re-tellings. Aside from the specifics of how each author uses this story, I think that there is a generational gesture here, one that relates to my sense of loss at the passing of Lavy Becker's generation. However, the issues of memory and identity raised here are subtle and complex, and would require more extensive exploration than can be attempted here, involving among other elements the uses and abuses of nostalgia and the role of a post-modern sense of rupture and irony.

Whatever the sense of loss my generation may feel at the disappearance of the living memory of lost Jewish worlds, this is only one part of the story where Lavy's Shul is concerned. As I have argued in the body of the dissertation, the synagogue community was not itself interested in hanging on to the past, nor in breaking definitively with it. As

Mordecai Kaplan's phrase had it, "the past has a vote but not a veto." A distinctive feature of the group was the way it combined both an attachment to the past and the perpetuation of traditional prayers, melodies and practices, with an excitement about the present and future, the sense of a meaningful project that would be part of the creative evolution of Judaism. One reflective question in this context might ask to what extent the fact of being anchored in traditional Jewish practice freed the shul community to be bold in its experimentation. It would be worthwhile to inquire whether the next generation, from which these traditional worlds were largely absent, felt impelled to return to tradition and to abandon the founders' project of critique, analysis and renewal.

3. A final question that arises naturally at this point is what lessons "Lavy's Shul" might have to teach a society that continues to be involved in a "quest for community." Is it in fact possible to learn something that might be of use to other community initiatives from what in many ways was a singular undertaking, a product of the particular individuals who put it together and of their place and time? I think it is possible and that it may also be desirable to learn from the experiment that was Lavy's Shul. First, I think that the shul's "do-it-yourself" philosophy was a good one. People need to be needed and the process of becoming involved and contributing makes for successful community building, as well as for a sense of pride and of agency. A further benefit is that financial and other resources are conserved.

A second lesson begins with the understanding that a traditional community offers a series of blessings, providing the vehicles and vessels through which people can together celebrate and mourn the powerful passages of a human life and mark the round of the seasons. The additional need that Lavy's Shul addressed was that of having a forum in which to address topics of ethical, social and political significance. The existence of such a

forum gives individuals a place to explore, to expand and to share their sense of the challenges their societies face. Such a “culture of conversation” also gives the community a way to maintain balance between the wisdom of the past and the creativity required to face the present and future.

VIII.2 Questions for further research

1. The first direction research following on from this dissertation might take would be to continue the work begun here with a study of the next era in the life of Montreal’s Reconstructionist Synagogue community. Such a study could continue the two-pronged approach used here, following both the broad social and political developments of the post-modern era in Quebec, Canada and Israel and also looking for reflections of these trends in the shul community. As well, it would document the extent to which the warmth and intimacy, the lively hybridity and the culture of conversation that characterized “Lavy’s Shul” would be carried on in the next generation, what kinds of changes the baby boom generation would bring in and what the relationship between the generations would be.
2. Lavy Becker’s life and work have been introduced here but examined only in part. A number of other avenues could usefully be explored, including a more thorough investigation of Becker’s contributions to “two civilizations” in Canada, the Jewish and the general; and a study of his work in small Jewish communities around the world for the World Jewish Congress.
3. Lavy Becker and a number of other members of the founding group had their roots in Montreal’s downtown immigrant district. Although a number of studies of this lively Yiddish-speaking community have been done, they have mostly focused on the secular

and the anti-religious population. Sara Tauben's documentation of the immigrant synagogues and Ira Robinson's forthcoming book on the Orthodox Eastern European rabbinate in the community begin to provide a fuller picture. Nonetheless, there remains a need more fully to understand the Orthodoxy that was the only denomination present in this community. What different kinds of roles did Jewish observance play and what kinds of meaning did it have in the lives of the downtown Jews?

4. The phenomenon of Reconstructionism is complex and has been studied to date only in pieces. There is not yet a comprehensive history of the movement including among other things profiles of a range of leading personalities, the impact of *The Reconstructionist* magazine, developments at different stages in the movement's evolution and the question of how the movement was received. Such a history should take into account Ira Eisenstein's point that Reconstructionism was "*sui generis*" and should not be reduced in a comparative manner to its functioning as a denomination. The reach of Reconstructionism through Kaplan's teaching and the ongoing vitality of his body of ideas would have to be taken into account, though how to balance these elements with the institutional and denominational would be one of the challenges of such a study.
5. Through the lens of a particular Jewish community, this study has offered a view of Canada during the years in which the country was going through a process of secularization. A worthwhile project in Canadian Studies would be to create and inter-relate a cluster of investigations of Church communities and other Canadian ethnic and religious communities contemporary to the "Lavy's Shul" years. Such a network of studies could provide a rich multi-cultural, multi-perspective historical understanding of this passage in Canada's history.

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Yerushalmi, Yosef Hayim. *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1989.

a. Archives Consulted

Canadian Jewish Congress National Archives, Montreal. Files on: Lavy Becker (includes audio tapes), Hampstead Schools, Bicentenary of Jews in Canada, Dorshei Emet, Montreal Synagogues and others.

Dorshei Emet (The Reconstructionist Synagogue of Montreal), Montreal. Synagogue Archives.

Hillel Becker, personal archive of material relating to his father.

Ira and Judith Kaplan Eisenstein Reconstructionist Archives at the Goldyne Savad Library Center, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College Archives, Wyncote, Pennsylvania.

McGill University Archives, Montreal. Dean of Arts Ira Allen Mackay, correspondence; Principal Arthur Currie, correspondence. Old McGill Yearbooks, 1926, 1927, 1928.

National Archives of Canada, Ottawa. MG 31H81 Lavy Becker Fonds.

Ratner Archives, Jewish Theological Seminary, New York. Faculty Minutes from 1929, 1930, 1931.

b. Archival and Unpublished Audio and Video Recordings

Keisel, Norm. Interview with Barry Lazar, one of three interviews with shul presidents done in 1985 with a view to posterity. Cassette tape recording. *Dorshei Emet*, the Reconstructionist Synagogue of Montreal.

Perlman, Irv. Interview with Barry Lazar, one of three interviews with shul presidents done in 1985 with a view to posterity. Cassette tape recording. *Dorshei Emet*, the Reconstructionist Synagogue of Montreal.

Reconstructionist Synagogue. Seven reel-to-reel tape recordings from 1967, six from the Eighth Annual Reconstructionist Convention in Montreal and one made during the congregation's Hanukkah party, December, 1967. (These recordings were uncovered in Montreal during the course of the research. The originals now reside in The Ira and Judith Kaplan Eisenstein Reconstructionist Archives at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. The Jewish Public Library Archives has copies on CD-Rom, made thanks to Eiran Harris, Archivist, as does *Dorshei Emet*, the Reconstructionist Synagogue).

_____. Video recorded by Garry Beitel and Barry Lazar in the context of a film they made in celebration of the synagogue's 36th birthday in 1996. Garry and Barry were kind enough to let me view the complete, unedited interview with Lavy Becker.

Wolofsky, Jack. Interview with Barry Lazar, one of three interviews with shul presidents done in 1985 with a view to posterity. Cassette tape recording. *Dorshei Emet*, the Reconstructionist Synagogue of Montreal.

c. List of Interviews

Aigen, Rabbi Ron. Interview by author, 8 November 2000, Montreal, Quebec.

Angel, Rhoda. Interview by author, 31 September 2000, Montreal, Quebec.

Barber, Anna. Interview by author, 26 September 2000, Montreal, Quebec.

Becker, Hillel. Interview by author, 22 February 2004; 12 May 2004, Montreal, Quebec.

Becker, Lavy. Interview by author, 16 March 1999, Montreal, Quebec.

Brassloff, Reuben. Interview by author, 27 February 2003; 16 June 2004, Montreal, Quebec.

Drazner, Heather. Telephone interview by author, 3 August 2004, Montreal, Quebec.

Frank, Donnie. Interview by author, 10 February 2003, Montreal, Quebec.

Goldsmith, Rabbi Emmanuel S. Telephone interview by author, 4 June 2006.

Gordon, Celia. Interview by author, 1 February, 2001, Montreal, Quebec.

Joseph, Rabbi Howard. Interview by author, 30 May 2005, Montreal, Quebec.

Kay, Barbara. Interview by author, 7 July 2004, Montreal, Quebec.

Kesler, Ethel. Interview by author, 16 October 2000, Montreal, Quebec.

Lasry, Dr. Jean-Claude. Interview by author, 11 April 2004, Montreal, Quebec.

Lasry, Pierre. Interview by author, 25 September 2000, Montreal, Quebec.

Levy, Dr. Barry. Interview by author, 27 November 2000, Montreal, Quebec.

Levitan, Saretta. Interview by author, 13 September 2000, Montreal, Quebec.

Shuchat, Rabbi Wilfred. Interview by author, 7 July 2004, Montreal, Quebec.

Winer, Herbert. Interview by author, 7 December 2001, Montreal, Quebec.

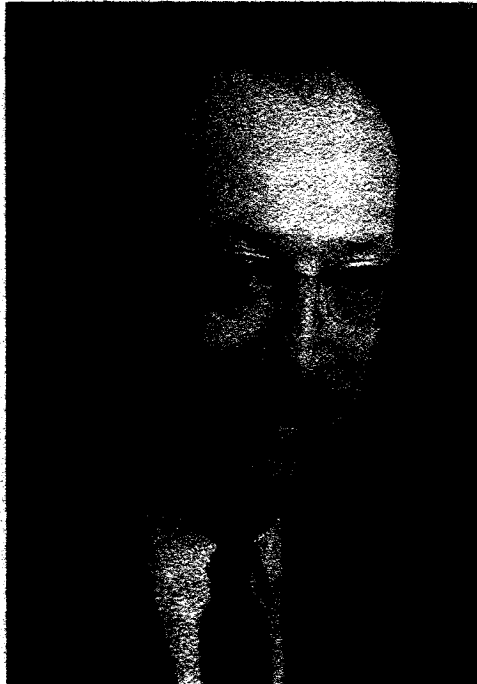
Winston, Milton. Telephone interview by author, 29 March 2003, Montreal, Quebec.

Wolofsky, Jack. Interview by author, 16 December 2000; 1 July 2005, Montreal, Quebec.

Wolofsky, Kay. Interview by author, 22 June 2001, Montreal, Quebec.

Yelin, Shulamis. Interview by author, 27 February 1999; 5 July 2000; 10 July 2000; 5 August 2000; 27 April 2001, Montreal, Quebec.

APPENDIX A. ILLUSTRATIONS



DEDICATED to Lavy M. Becker — rabbi, teacher, mentor, friend and founder of the Reconstructionist Synagogue of Montreal — in recognition of his life-long commitment to Judaism, his concern for others and his involvement in organizations for Jewish advancement and human betterment in Montreal, elsewhere in Canada and throughout the rest of the world. He has inspired all of us to rededicate ourselves to our people, to strengthen our Jewishness, to find new meaning in our tradition and to aspire to the highest ideals of humanity.

Figure 1: Lavy Becker with text from "Beginnings, Memories, Bar Mitzvah" Reconstructionist Synagogue, 1975, p. 3.

Old McGill-1926



Back Row: MR. HAY FINLAY D. MCKAY P. MULLER C. T. BUCHANAN S. W. COLEMAN D. ROSE R. CARON
Middle Row: L. M. BECKER R. DELAHAY S. MCKEYS F. CONSIGLIO D. O. BREMER
Front Row: W. CONSIGLIO P. CUMINE

The McGill Gymnastic Club

Figure 2: Old McGill Year Book, 1926.



Figure 3: Lavy Becker greets Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. From the *New York Times*, Sunday, July 2, 1967.



Figure 4: The Reconstructionist Synagogue. From "Beginnings, Memories, Bar Mitzvah" Reconstructionist Synagogue, 1975. p.1.

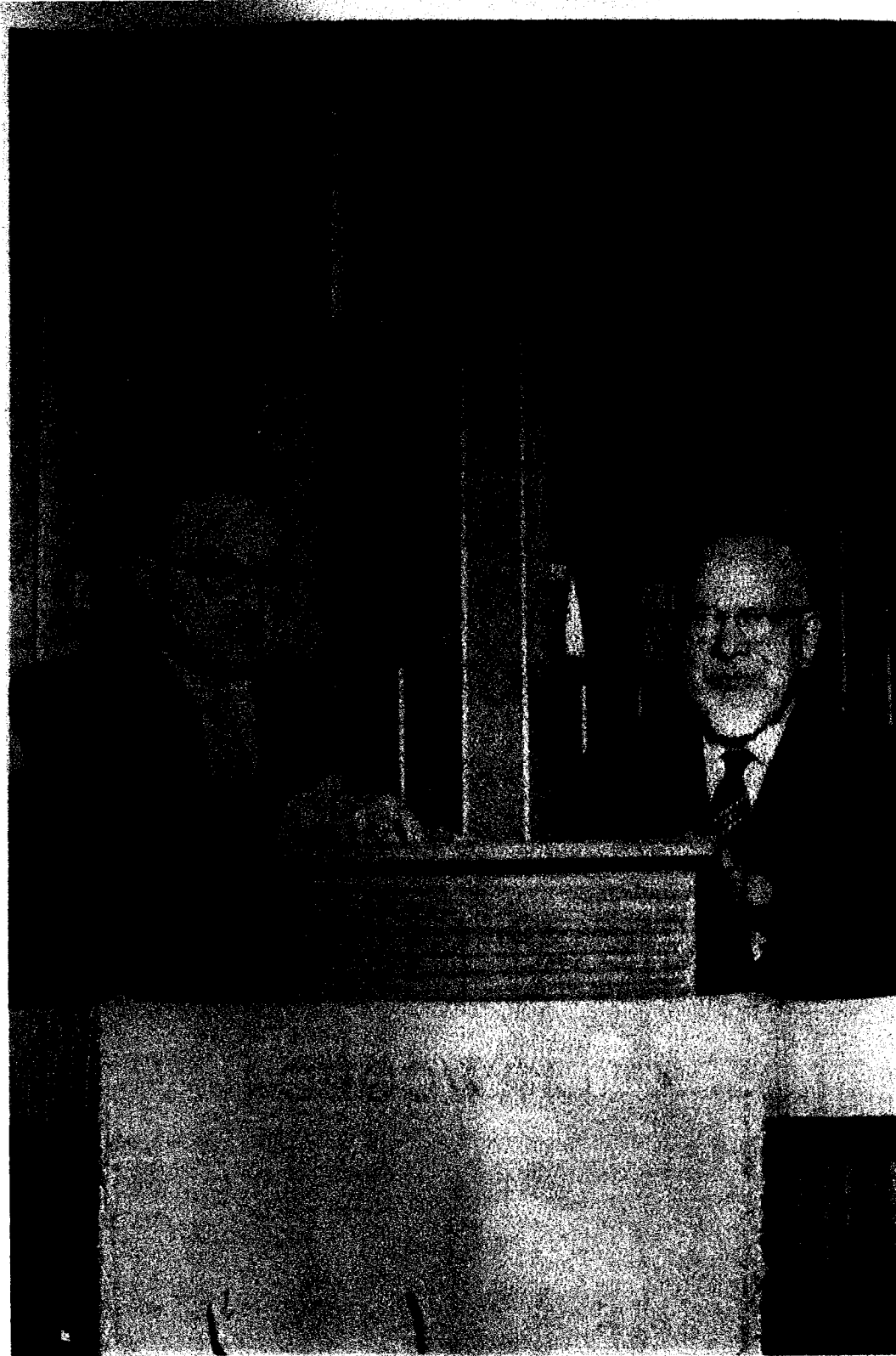


Figure 5: Stephen Barber and Mordecai Kaplan, Dedication Day, 1967. From "Beginnings, Memories, Bar Mitzvah" Reconstructionist Synagogue, 1975, p. 18.



Figure 6: Augusta Becker snips the ribbon on Dedication Day. From "Beginnings, Memories, Bar Mitzvah" Reconstructionist Synagogue, 1975, p. 19.



Figure 7: Dedication Day, May 28, 1967. From "Beginnings, Memories, Bar Mitzvah" Reconstructionist Synagogue, 1975, p. 17.



Figure 8: Circle Dance, from *The Jewish Catalog*, Inside Front Cover.

There Is A Synagogue . . .

WHERE tradition is respected, yet is given modern interpretation and meaning,

WHERE reason is preserved, and religion interpreted in naturalistic terms,

WHERE the prayer book has been re-written in the "modern idiom" and which includes new 20th century religious writing,

WHERE families sit together and group worship is possible through total congregational participation,

WHERE contemporary Judaism is believed capable of flourishing in Canada, yet maintains the historic ties with Israel,

WHERE community affairs and world problems are of important concern to the Congregation.

If you wish to participate in the High Holy Day Worship of

This Reconstructionist Synagogue

at 5170 Van Horne Avenue, Montreal, Please Call

747-3190 or 733-8661 or 733-8980

to arrange for seating.

THE SCHEDULE OF SERVICES IS AS FOLLOWS :

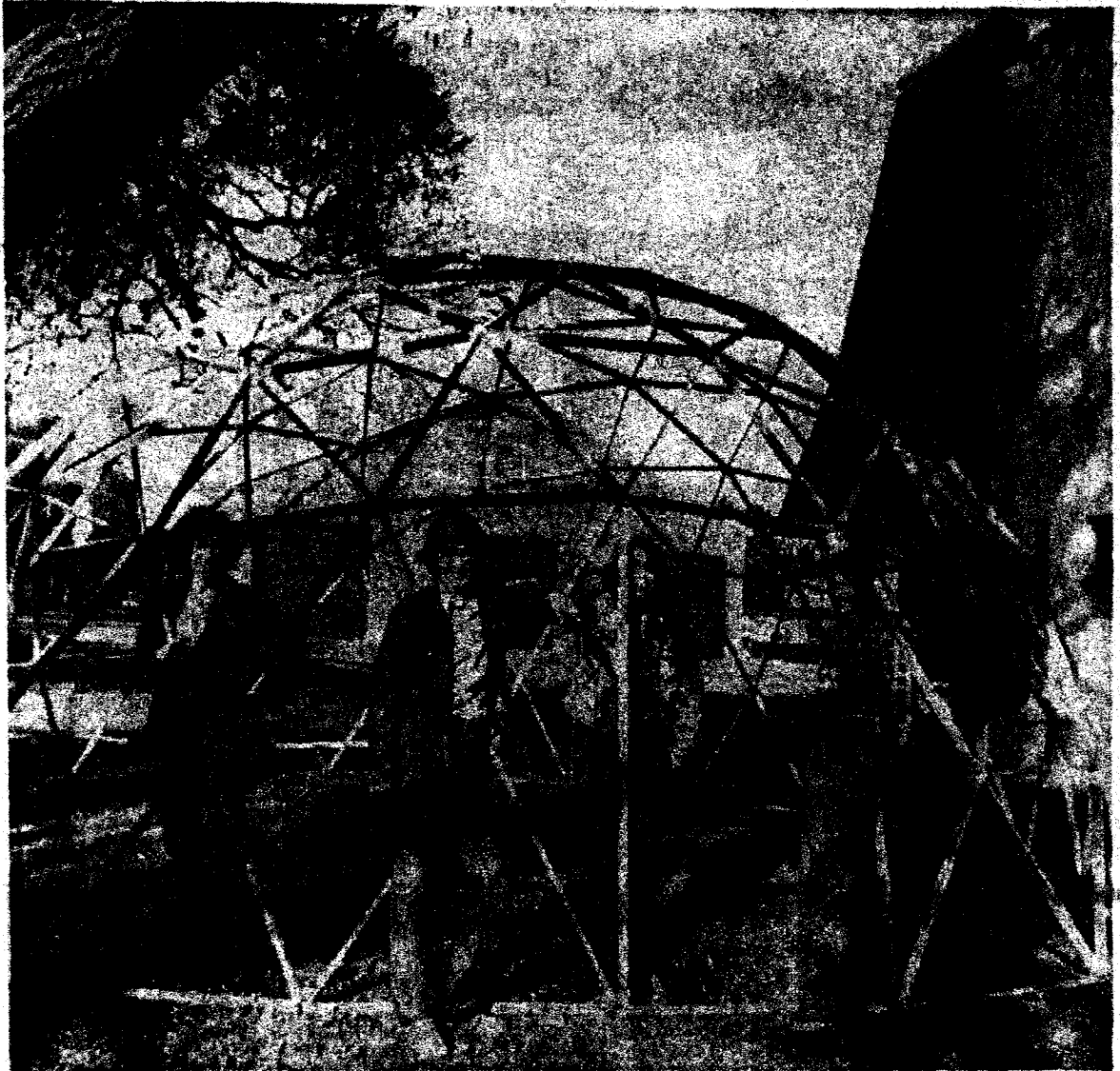
| | | | |
|-----------------|-------------------|---|---------------|
| Rosh Hashonah — | Sunday, Sept. 26 | — | 6:30 p.m. |
| | Monday, Sept. 27 | — | 9:00 a.m. |
| | | | and 6:30 p.m. |
| | Tuesday, Sept. 28 | — | 9:00 a.m. |
| Yom Kippur — | Tuesday, Oct. 5 | — | 6:15 p.m. |
| | Wednesday, Oct. 6 | — | 9:00 a.m. |

Advertisement in The Montreal Star, Sept. 11, 1965.

Figure 9: Advertisement reprinted in "Beginnings, Memories, Bar Mitzvah" Reconstructionist Synagogue, 1975, inside back cover.



Figure 10: Reconstructionist Movement Logo



Montreal Star. September 23, 1972.

Staff Photo by John Duggan

Figure 11: Youth group proudly displays their geodesic *sukkah*.

APPENDIX B. ETHICAL PROTOCOL

The following informed consent agreement was entered into orally with the people I interviewed. At the time I was conducting the interviews, I was not planning to identify people by name but as the study developed I changed my approach. As a result, I did re-contact all of the people whose names appear in this work, as promised, and submitted the part of my text that cited their testimony to them for verification.

It is not now my intention to cite people by name when I write this study. However, should I wish to identify people and to use anything you have said, I will show you the material in writing. If you do not then wish me to cite you by name, I will not do so. If you object to my citing your interview material at all, I will not use it.