

January 2024



Kol Nidre on January 5

Recording by Rabbi Aryeh Hirschfield

My Grandson Theo and the Birth of the Portland Jewish Community in 1979.

Dear Friends,

I was a witness to the two events, as it happened both involving Jewish music, that led to the birth of the style, spirit and feeling of the modern Portland Jewish Community.

The first was created by singer Margie Rosenthal at Temple Beth Israel at what was called "The Miller Room Service." It was only music, but it was disruptive in a somewhat political sense. More about that at another time.

The second was the initial High Holyday services of synagogue Havurah Shalom, held in the auditorium of the Mittleman Jewish Community Center in 1979. A newly arrived Jewish master Aryeh Hirschfield was the Cantor. Aryeh had a tremendous Yeshiva Jewish education, knew and could read Talmud, and with his soft tenor voice that ultimately would go on to change so many lives all around the world, knew the nusach, classic sacred cantorial melodies, inside and out.

The power of those High Holyday services with Aryeh at the helm was disruptive-squared. Today Havurah Shalom is among the most influential, meaningful and largest synagogues in Portland.

But what happened that night has to me largely been lost. No tapes or videos. And, what happened in rehearsal when Aryeh met to plan those services, was to my memory, even more powerful, musically, than even those services. And that was surely lost.

Well...maybe not.

During the summer of 2022 our grandson Theo was visiting. Prowling around my office, filled with stacks and stacks of books, vinyls and CD's. Theo discovered behind the door, largely ignored for so many years, a stack of a hundred or so cassette tapes.

“What are these grandpa?”

And I showed him on a barely functional player I had in the garage how to play it. Theo asked me if he could take 10 or so tapes home to California, and I told him I'd send a cassette player, which Alan Cohen was kind enough to help me find a brand new Sony cassette boombox. I liked it so much I got one myself and was determined to “go through my old tapes.”

Over the months I looked at a few tapes, and about four weeks ago I picked out one marked “Aryeh – Save” that I had made one night in 1979 with Aryeh preparing for the holidays. I had never been aware of it being in my collection and didn't expect it to work as I placed it into the new player I only had because of Theo.

And there on that lost tape was Aryeh rehearsing, creating an entire accapella magnificence, both flawless and casual of, no less than the Kol Nidre. Oh my. As I listened, I knew it was, like everything that Aryeh sang, above all, a prayer for peace. Less for forgiveness, the traditional purpose of the Kol Nidre. Rather for peace. A kind of Sim Shalom.

I'm going to play Aryeh's few mintues long recording at the time of the d'var Torah at our first Shabbat service for the new year on January 5. It's a totally unusual thing to do, a little awkward perhaps.

At a minimum it's a way to remember the transformative Rabbi Hirschfield, and to meditate during his singing, for peace in the new year.

Sending a safe, healthy year.

Alan Berg