

# Presidential Matters

by Bob Stern



At a recent Shabbat service, I had the honor of the second aliya and after Richie called me up as Reuven Daniel ben Avraham, Chuck corrected him by adding ha Levi. Richie was taken aback and Chuck explained that I had recently become a Levi. How could I recently become a Levi you might ask? Let me give you some background that might help set the picture.

Unlike many of you, my religious upbringing was minimal, and that's being kind. While my paternal grandparents were observant, they passed away when I was very young. My parents were not at all religious or observant. My two sisters and I knew we were Jewish but there were no role models to emulate. I went to Hebrew School at our small local synagogue and became a Bar Mitzvah. I'm sure I must have asked my father if we were Kohen or Levi and was told we were just Israelites and I accepted that. I attended High Holiday services with friends for several years (my parents never went) and then I too stopped. When our sons started Hebrew School at OJC I became a Board member and a Vice President. I attended High Holiday services and the occasional social event but never went to Shabbat services. After a tenure of 12 years I resigned from the Board in 1998 when my father became ill. I still attended High Holiday services but that was about all. About seven years ago, I got a call asking if I would run for the Board and Treasurer. Despite much trepidation I agreed. Unfortunately our president passed away soon thereafter and somebody was needed to step in. With even more reluctance and trepidation, I offered to run if the Board felt it wise. I was very quick to point out what they already knew – I was not a regular at Shabbat services nor was I likely to change. I told the Board not to expect to see me at every, or even most Shabbatot. Long story short, I started attending the Friday night services to make sure we had the requisite minyan. And then I started to attend an occasional Shabbat service. Then I'd appear at various holiday services. My Shabbat attendance became more frequent. I asked myself why and my only answer was that I was truly enjoying it. I was becoming more comfortable as I became more familiar with the service. And I was among friends. When I first started attending Shabbat services I would sit by myself. Soon thereafter Maury invited me to sit with "the regulars." Several years ago he and I were talking and he said "Who would have ever thought that you'd be coming to so many Shabbat services? I'm proud of you Stern." And he grinned.

Anyway, back to the original theme, my wife and I make the usual annual pilgrimages to the cemeteries just before the holidays. Last year we were at Mount Hebron visiting our paternal grandparents (they are a few sections apart). I easily found my grandfather Max' grave, said a few words, left some stones then searched for my grandmother Gussie's grave. I found it and for the first time noticed a footstone that read Grandmother. In all the years I had gone with my father and uncle and then with my wife, I had never noticed it. Out of curiosity I went back to Max' grave and sure enough it also had a footstone. His was in Hebrew and the only words I could understand were his name—Mordecai ben Avraham ha Levi.

So, in truth, I didn't just become a Levi, I just found out that I was a Levi. It took me 67 years to learn that fact. Would it have made any difference? Would I have been inclined to be more religious or observant? I've given it some thought and the honest answer is that I just don't know. The important thing is that I had already made changes in my religious life with which I'm very comfortable and content. Religion is a very personal thing and we must all find our own comfort level but to do that, one must be willing to give it a serious try. It worked for me.

To one and all, a Zeisen Pesach!

Bob Stern