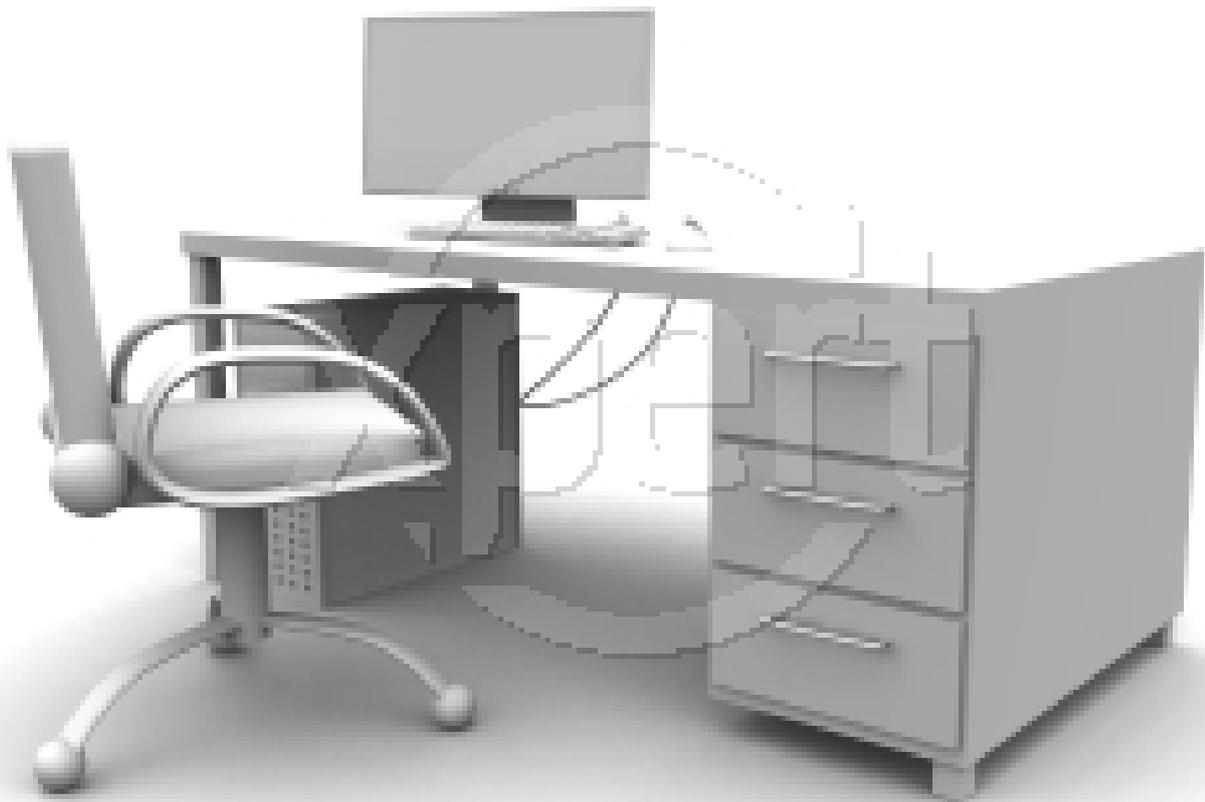


# The Hebrew Education of a Secular Jew

By Clifford Goldstein



I became editor of *Shabbat Shalom* (then *The Israelite*) in 1984, not long after I had a life changing experience while living in Israel. Though a secular Jew whose Jewish education consisted of being traumatized as a child by Holocaust stories, I was wandering through Europe when, following a dream (yes, the kind of dream you have when sleeping), I woke up and

flew to Israel to live on a Kibbutz, an idea that hadn't entered my mind when I closed my eyes that night. There, after a year among my own people, seeing what they had accomplished after the ashes of the Holocaust, I was for the first time in my 23 years firmly rooted in my Jewish roots.

After returning to the United States and intend-

ing even to make *aliyah*, I changed my mind, based on certain circumstances, and within a few years found myself editor of *Shabbat Shalom*. It was here, in this job, that I got the Hebrew education I never had as a child, and that included an MA in Ancient Northwest Semitic languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Ugaritic) at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. It was in this job that I learned so much about Jewish history—the call of Abram (technically not even a Jew), the Exodus, the conquests of Joshua, the first Temple and the Second Temple, the impact of Yeshua of Notzrim, the Diaspora up through the Shoah, and the establishment of modern Israel.

Of all the things I learned, perhaps the one that made the biggest impression on me was the incredible difference between the religion of ethical monotheism and the surrounding pagan faiths. Where did the Jews, living in a world of polytheism, come up with the idea of only one God? In a world steeped in idolatry, how did they imagine a prohibition against idolatry? Where did they, amid cultures steeped in the rankest immorality, come up with the moral and ethical codes that they did? Was it “Jewish genius,” as it has been called? I don’t think so. I think it was because, as the Hebrew Bible clearly states, God had called them out to be His chosen people—His *segulah*—among all the nations of the world. I’ve read enough critical studies to know that the scholars say the Jews got it from Egypt, or from Babylon, or from the Canaanites, and so forth. I didn’t buy it then and don’t buy it now. What they got from those people were the very things that God warned them against. Far from getting their special identity from pulling religions and moral and cultural concepts from their

neighbors, the Hebrews were constantly being warned by God against following those practices. Indeed, a good hunk of the Hebrew Bible, particularly the prophets, was spent in remonstrance with the Jews to not become like their neighbors. And yet, if the scholars are to be believed, it was from these people that the Jews got their identity. I don’t think so.

I learned a lot in my tenure as editor of *Shabbat Shalom*. It gave me an education that I don’t think I could have gotten elsewhere and helped me learn things that I never knew before. Thus I considered it a privilege to seek and share those things with anyone, Jew or Gentile, who would read the magazine. It’s kind of exciting to think that *Shabbat Shalom* has been in existence for 50 years. That’s as old as I am! Fifty years seems like a long time, but in the history of my people, the Jews, it’s only a flash. Let’s hope the light keeps on shining as long as there is darkness (and there is) that needs to be dispelled.



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