



DR. ROBERT AND BRENDA MORTEN

[Robert's comments are in *italics*; Brenda's in standard type]

Robbie, let's start by talking a little about your background.

My father came from Germany just before World War II and his father came out earlier. There was a fairly strong German Jewish community in South Africa. The business opportunity was ripe for them, so he came out and then brought the family out. My mother came in different circumstances. She came after the war. Her brother and uncles had

come to South Africa from England and had established themselves, and she decided to come on a vacation and never left. So that's how she ended up in South Africa.

What was your experience of being Jewish in South Africa?

It was wonderful. The Jewish community in South Africa is a very close-knit Jewish community. There are about 100,000 Jews living in Johannesburg in complete freedom of religion, so there is never any persecution.

The beauty about growing up in Johannesburg as a Jew was everybody lived in the same neighborhoods, so your only friends and the only social contacts you ever had were Jewish people. One of the things that's a major concern in the United States, which is assimilation, wasn't a problem in South Africa because you never had the opportunity to date or to mix with non-Jews unless you were in business. So growing up Jewish in South Africa was really a wonderful experience.

What were your family's traditions or rituals and practices?

We came from a traditional Orthodox family. The way that Jewish life works in South Africa is that about 90 % of Jews are Orthodox, and maybe 10% are Conservative and Reform. The Orthodox Judaism they follow is a little different from here. They may not practice being Orthodox Jews, but they only would be affiliated with an Orthodox shul. The Rabbi and the shul that they attend would have to be strictly Orthodox and follow all the rituals and rules. They would never dream of becoming Conservative or Reform even though they don't actually practice being Orthodox Jews. They are called non-practicing Orthodox Jews. So it was a unique experience.

We would observe the Sabbath, we would light candles, and we would go to shul Friday night. Saturday wasn't a big shul service in South Africa. And people would drive to shul, but would be very upset if the Rabbi drove to shul. They were very strict about the Rabbi following very strict rules. Everything he did had to be strictly Orthodox.

Everybody had formal Bar Mitzvahs or Bat Mitzvahs. The Bat Mitzvahs were strictly Orthodox in the sense that the girls would not participate in any of the Torah readings.

So that was the way we were brought up as Jews. There was a strong affiliation with Israel and being Zionist.

I met Brenda in South Africa, when we were sixteen and we were both on vacation in a seaside town called Durban.

Brenda, would you tell me about your family's background?

My father came from Poland. His father came because he heard there were good business opportunities in South Africa, which was fortunate, because he came just before the war.

After my grandfather settled in South Africa, he brought my father, his sister and my grandmother across, because the rest of his family all died in Poland. He said they kept hearing, "This one's missing, and that one's missing," until they didn't hear anymore.

My mother was actually born in South Africa. My grandfather went from Russia to Australia, then to South Africa, and my grandmother was born in South Africa. So actually my mother, my son and I are three generations of South Africans, which is unusual.

Were your family members all Orthodox?

Yes. My mother's parents owned an Orthodox kosher hotel, and my father's family was always strictly Orthodox. And we were brought up in an Orthodox environment.

Almost everybody in South Africa is Orthodox. They used to have Conservative, although it was called Reform, but actually it was more Conservative than Conservative is in the U.S.A. But there were very few temples that were Conservative. Even if they didn't keep up with Orthodoxy, everyone belonged to an Orthodox shul.

Did you and Robbie marry in South Africa?

Yes, we were married in South Africa, and we had our children in South Africa. Then we

decided we didn't like the political situation or the policies of the country. Apartheid and segregation were morally incorrect. We felt that all people should be equal and given the same respect and opportunities as each other. We wanted our children to be brought up in the U.S.A., so we came when they were really young, 20 years ago.

How did you end up in Los Angeles?

We started off in New York, because Robbie got a residency in Radiology at Columbia University there. My sister lived in Tarzana while we lived in New York, so in order to help each other, and be part of each other's lives, we decided to move to Tarzana after Robert completed his training.

We lived in Tarzana for about a year and then we moved here, to Orange County.

How did you feel about the religious options for yourselves?

In New York it was really easy because there must have been four Orthodox temples a block away, so we went to the Riverdale

Jewish Center. We were there for four years. Of the choices we had, we chose the Riverdale Jewish Center, as that was the closest to what we were used to attending.

In Tarzana, we went to Chabad.

Then, 15 years ago, we were looking for a house in Orange County, and the real estate agent told us there was an Orthodox temple in Yorba Linda, so we bought a house in Yorba Linda, not too far from the temple.

What made you move to Orange County?

After Robert completed his training, he joined a group of Radiologists in Orange County.

How did you feel about the Jewish community here?

There really aren't a lot of Jews, and those Jews that are here are not affiliated, so there is a much bigger percentage of Jews than people imagine. My concern was that there was an Orthodox shul or Jewish Center nearby for myself, as well as others who were

non-affiliated. While we were living in Tarzana, the children went to Emek, in North Hollywood. When we moved to Orange County, they went to the Hebrew Academy, a Lubavich school in Westminster.

You said that the realtor told you about this shul being Orthodox. Did you come and check it out?

We actually came and introduced ourselves to the Rabbi first, but it wasn't a big influence on why we came here. It was the fact that there was an Orthodox shul and they had their own property. Rabbis come and go. I think it was a good choice for us, but the important thing was that it was Orthodox.

What are you memories of the shul back then?

It was an interesting place. It was a rundown, dilapidated farmhouse. If anybody came in, we would be embarrassed and less than proud of it. But, it was the steppingstone to where we hoped to go in the future.

We had a battle initially, because there was always a negative group of people trying to draw us down, so there was a lot of anguish

and conflict. They just didn't think that the project would ever succeed because no other shul in this area has ever succeeded. They tried storefronts and office factories, and no one was able to raise a dollar. Fortunately, those people moved on, and we prevailed.

For what the finances were at the time, it was actually a very smart move. The property, which was two-acres, was very reasonable. We are able to purchase it for \$200,000. We actually achieved something that was amazing by building a center, without any mortgage. The challenge then was bringing in people to form a community.

It seems like a huge challenge to build up such a community.

One thing is that, with Chabad, there are often transient members; the members come and go. Because we don't really have a membership fee, we charge for seats for High Holidays. We are delighted when anyone enters the shul, and we will welcome every person with open arms and will embrace anybody who shows an interest. That's the philosophy of Chabad. So that transient membership is one of the factors that results in some instability in the community here, as

opposed to some of the other shuls in New York or even up in the Valley that have a very large core constituent membership which this one doesn't have. It's difficult, very difficult to attract non-Orthodox Jews to come to Chabad.

One of the problems that the community here has, and I think California has, and maybe America has - which is very different than South Africa - is migration. Generally in New York or Tarzana, people don't stay around for a long time. We grew up in a neighborhood in South Africa where your children would grow up and your grandchildren would grow up. Everybody was always around and you knew families going back many generations.. Here, people go from Orange County to San Diego to Glendale, or wherever their job takes them. It took me some time to learn this. So most of the folks that were originally members of this shul have all moved on. There is a very small core of members that have remained.

How did non-Jews receive this shul initially?

There's a great question. Yorba Linda per capita must have more churches than any other city I've ever seen. Just drive around and you'll see church after church up and down the street. There's never been any anti-

Semitism while we've built the shul. In fact it's been the exact opposite. When we were building this shul, the Catholic church up the road did a fundraiser for us voluntarily. One mass on a Sunday, the priest stood up and said, "We would like to do a collection for the shul down the road." And they collected a couple of thousand dollars for us.

When we were building, and we didn't have classrooms, the Presbyterian church across the road let us use their classroom and chairs. When we moved in, the same church also gave us a clock made of Jerusalem stone.

Every two or three years there's a women's non-denominational meeting held at various venues. They invited all the churches and shuls, and Rabbi and Stella Eliezrie manage to get kosher food for our table. Stella gave the blessing for the event, which encourages the city and its citizens to be tolerant of each other. Thank goodness we live in such a city.

Every year we have a Hanukkah service at the Jewish Community Center and non-Jews come. We also have a large Hanukkah service at the Richard Nixon Library, which is well attended by Jews and non Jews alike.

So no, we don't face any problems even though we are really a small minority.

Let's talk more about the success of the shul so far. What would you attribute that to?

Hard work. The Rabbi did really an earnest job in fundraising.

One of the most instrumental things in the shul's survival was my husband assuming the role of President of the shul. As one of the hardest things is to balance the secular with the religious aspect of an Orthodox shul, Robert has been responsible for the speech each year at the "Kol Nidre Appeal" at Yom Kippur. Also, overseeing the budget for the building fund and working with the construction company. But most important, was giving credibility to potential donors and the city planners.

A lot of groundwork had to be done. We had to show that we were getting enough money and we had a very savvy business plan.

A lot of people didn't want to donate money because they said they had donated money before, and they couldn't see what happened

to it. They had to realize the shul needs money to run. We had to establish trust within the community. So Robbie was instrumental in actually talking to people with a business plan, telling them where the money's going, so it wouldn't just disappear. And I think because of that, a lot of people gave more than they would have, or people who wouldn't have given, did.

Robbie, do you have some background in development?

No. We just wanted this to work. We had a strong desire.

When you moved down here, your children were already enrolled at the Hebrew Academy?

They enrolled when we came to Orange County. The bus used to come from Westminster every day, to pick them up.

There were about fourteen kids on the bus. It was a long day. They would leave at six thirty in the morning and get home in summer at five o'clock. It was hot, and the bus would break down often, so the kids were real troopers.

They didn't have much involvement at the shul in Yorba Linda.. They were just at the age where there wasn't much going on in this facility.

They had their Bar Mitzvahs at Chabad in Tarzana because, just before the oldest one, Warren, was Bar Mitzvahed, we couldn't use this building for some reason. So we had to quickly send out another invitation saying, "We've moved the venue" to Tarzana. So, with the second one, we thought, you know, "We'll just stick with Tarzana." But Rabbi Eliezrie did come to Tarzana as a guest at the Bar Mitzvahs.

Let's talk about the Rabbi.

He's done a remarkable job. I think the mere fact of an Orthodox rabbi being placed in Yorba Linda is a major strain on anybody. They have a certain choice where they may go, but the final decision is made by Chabad headquarters. He was originally in Anaheim, and had the foresight to come to Yorba Linda. He's one man out of the whole city of 60,000 that looks like he does. It's a challenge for him and his children, so for him to have survived was remarkable—and it's an uphill battle every day.

He has the job of trying to fundraise, trying to maintain the shul, and to keep programs going. It's very, very hard, so he's done an amazing job, and this place is a testament to what he's been able to achieve. He really is a go-getter. I could not say anything negative about him. He's focused. Sometimes he gets a little distracted with all that he has to do, and then you just pull him back. I just think that he's done a really remarkable job.

He doesn't have a great singing voice, but he admits to that, and fortunately, his one son and his son-in-law, Levi, have wonderful voices, so we've resolved that problem. His speeches are very succinct. Chabad services are very informal. Anybody can stand up and daven for the day, there's no choir, and there's no chanting. It's nothing like what we were used to back in South Africa, where we had a choir and a chazan.

The services are very nice because everybody participates and there is a sense of warmth and caring.

Being Orthodox, you have to segregate the women and the men. I think that one of the strongest drawbacks to Orthodox Jews, if not

the biggest, is that women cannot participate in certain parts of the service. A lot of women want to be involved. I think David has done a reasonably good job in trying to integrate the women into the service as much as possible. For an Orthodox rabbi, it's a big challenge. He's never gone across the line. For example, he'll walk around with the Torah in both the men's and women's section, which is probably in the strict sense, a no-no, but I don't think he wishes to offend anybody. I think that has been his approach ever since he's been here—to try and balance what he was brought up with what he was taught with what people actually want in this community.

I think in this country, most people are not Orthodox, so to attract people to come to services, you have to offer them something that they want and feel comfortable with, such as trying to do the services in both English and Hebrew. That is somewhat foreign to what we would normally do, but I think it's enabled folks who can't read or have difficulty following the Hebrew to be able to follow. Certain prayers are said in English so that you can get a feeling of what the prayers are.

But women are not called up to the Torah, and we wouldn't allow anything like that, since this is forbidden in Orthodox services.

So, that would never happen.

I think the Rabbi has tried as much as he thinks he can, to extend invitations to people. His philosophy is pretty much "drive to shul." Right, he'll never say "don't drive."

He'd rather you came to shul and participate and gain the benefit of praying. But he will not condone driving.

How far do you walk to shul?

It depends on where we are staying. We usually drive to shul in Yorba Linda, as we live too far to walk.

Can you say something about Stella Eliezrie?

We're wonderful friends with her. She's very outspoken, and an educated woman, and knowledgeable about Judaism. She's certainly not the typical Rebbetzin that you would normally see. If she has a point of view that differs from anyone, she'll say it; she's not going to hold back. She has her

opinion, and she'll say what she feels, right or wrong, and she'll argue about it until somebody proves her right or wrong.

The Rabbi very seldom talks politics in shul. For instance, during the last Presidential election, the Rabbi would never say we should vote for X or for Y, and he doesn't say why X is better than Y. That's up to the individuals; he doesn't want to influence people in that way.

He will influence you about whether land in Israel should be given up or should not. Chabad has very strong views with regard to what should and should not be done in Israel, and David being a Lubavitch, that's his philosophy, and he isn't going to change. So he will quite easily come in and say, "They should not be doing this or that. That would be wrong," and then will give reasons, because that's his approach.

And, religiously and spiritually, he'll try to influence you. He will always encourage you to develop both religiously and spiritually. He will never criticize you and will always try to explain a concept in a manor that you will be able to understand.

Let's talk a bit about what you see as the long term goals and challenges for the shul?

I don't think the biggest challenge is building the second phase of the shul. I think that is going to happen, and I don't think there will be difficulty in having enough money. If not, we will raise enough money, via all possible means, to complete the project, which is going to be quite spectacular. For example, we'll have the first Mikvah in Northern Orange County.

From my perspective, the biggest problem is attracting new people to the shul. You know, people say, "You build it, they will come." A lot of Jews from North Orange County are moving to South Orange County. A bigger concentration of young people are there. So that's why we have to try and build up a preschool, Hebrew school, and Bar Mitzvah classes. Those are the three key areas that we have to focus on in order to make this a viable growing community. The Rabbi is going to have to go out into the community and stimulate new people to come, and offer programs that are broad enough they will bring people in and keep them in. I think the long-term goal will be to really build up a first-class Jewish Center.

So that there will be a place with all the necessary services for Jewish people who move here.

Another challenge for an Orthodox shul is that a lot of people with daughters want their daughters to have a Bat Mitzvah like a Bar Mitzvah, where they stand up and read the Torah, which they couldn't have here. Women's libbers don't like that. They feel that girls have to be equal to boys, so, if the boys stand up and read the Torah, the girls need to do that also. Unfortunately, this is not allowable in an Orthodox shul, and for me this is the norm, since I grew up Orthodox. But I can see this is a major issue that needs to be addressed.

Some girls have had Bat Mitzvahs here, and they do it on a Sunday, and do other things than read from Torah. But some people left when it was about the time for their kids to have Bar or Bat Mitzvahs, because we would not allow girls to read from the Torah. Also, the facility before was less than optimal, and not considered a nice enough looking facility for a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. So they would leave, and then they'd come back after all the kids had their Bar or Bat Mitzvahs.

There are some things I would like to see in this congregation as it grows. We can set up enough subcommittees that there is a counseling committee and also a social committee so, if somebody has an operation or is in need and can't cook, somebody from the shul does the cooking for them. We would do small things like that. We don't have a committee now, but the community does do that, just volunteers and brings food and so forth.

Now Levi, his son-in-law, is working with him and he's the chaplain for this community. He goes to the hospitals, he'll go to your house, he'll go to prisons, he'll go to the schools. He does a really great job.

It is a little congregation, but its influence is quite wide within this community. And one thing I would say is, regardless of people's affiliation, when it comes to a crisis—

This is where they come.

The only place they turn to is here. It doesn't matter if there's a Reform temple around the corner or Conservative, when push comes to

shove in a crisis, it's the only place they turn to for support.

And why is that?

I honestly think that, when there's a true crisis, unless you have a really strong affiliation with some other center, your roots really come back, and you say, "I want to be as close to my roots as I can get." And the closest is probably Orthodox, rightly or wrong. It's amazing. We see folks that are non-affiliated Conservative and Reform, but when they want a minyan and want what their grandfather did, this is what they turn to. When they want a funeral, they turn to Orthodox. We are the Orthodox shul in this community.