



## **NATHAN AND AURELIA KVETNY**

### **Nathan, let's talk about your background.**

My family moved from Kiev, Russia, to Palestine in 1932 to get away from the Russian regime and live in a Jewish state. My grandparents went there first because they were very religious, and they came from a string of rabbis, which left an impression on them, so they wanted to live in Israel.

My mother followed, in about 1933. She worked in Israel to send foreign currency to Russia to get my father out of Russia and

bring him to Israel. They married shortly after he got to Israel.

I was born in Tel Aviv, Israel, which used to be known as Palestine, in 1935.

**Would you say more about your family's religious observances?**

My family was religious. That was just the way they always were. They were so happy to finally be living in The Holy Land, Israel.

My most vivid memories were walking a half hour to the two-room, tiny shul house with my grandfather, father and two brothers. I remember the rabbi and his wife living in one room and the other room was the prayer room. There were so many men standing wall-to-wall praying together. After the Friday night service, we would all walk home. We were welcomed by my mother. I remember that our house was clean with a big table covered with a white, festive tablecloth. She used the Shabbat dishes, the wine and two challahs to complete the festive look.

The aroma of the chicken soup, the smell of the homemade gefilte fish and the meat will

stay with me all my life. We dined, sang Shabbat songs, exchanged stories and laughter filled the whole, tiny apartment. We were happy. On Saturday morning we would walk to shul again for two or three hours of services and then walk back to the house. Inevitably, we would have two or three shul members join us for a home-cooked lunch. They loved my mother's cooking, too, just as I did. I remember that we all enjoyed sharing our meal with them. I remember that I could feel the holiness of the Shabbat day.

**Those sound like really nice memories.**

Yes, I miss it. I can still smell my mother's dishes and remember the small, clean apartment. The conversation around the dinner table was full of happiness, joy and peace.

**How long did you live in Israel?**

After I finished tech school, I joined the armed forces in 1953 when Israel was only about five years old. I was there until 1956 and served in the Suez Canal War. A friend of mine decided to come to study electronics in the United States. I followed him and the rest is the history of my adult life.

I arrived by ship from Israel to New York. I had to stay in the harbor over the 4<sup>th</sup> of July and got into the city on July 5, 1957. I was very disappointed to find that all the decorations and flags were not for me!

I stayed with distant relatives, but the climate was not for me.

So, I went west to Los Angeles, because the climate was very much like my beloved Israel. I went to college and finished with an engineering degree in electronics. I did not care for it, though, because I'm a people person. So, I went back to school and I took up optometry, and four more years later I got my second degree.

**What were you finding when you moved to this country in terms of being a Jew here?**

It was very confusing – very, very confusing. The first time I went to a Reform synagogue for Rosh Hashanah, the president of the shul said that they made arrangements for parking. I couldn't understand it or believe it. I actually did not attend shul for some time because of schoolwork and trying to

make a living. After a while, I moved to a big apartment complex. It turned out to be very good, because that's where I met Aurelia, my wife for the past 36 years.

**Aurelia, let's talk about your own life and background before we move on.**

I was born in Port Said, Egypt, in 1934 which is on the Suez Canal entrance. There was a law in Egypt that a local captain had to navigate the ships into the canal. Both of my grandfathers came there for work from Europe, because they were captains of ships. My father's father came from Italy and my mother's father came from France. My mother was two when they came and my father was born in Egypt. We were five siblings in our family. We were not religious at all. The holidays were barely observed.

**What was it like in Egypt for you before the war, being Jewish?**

It was like of like, if you don't flash that you are Jewish, there was no problem. And during Pesach, you keep your children in because they think that Jews kill the little children to have the blood for Passover. When I was growing up, I was aware of that.

A few people that lived near the synagogue were Orthodox and they kept the traditions. We did not have kosher food. We did get the matzahs during the Passover from Cairo, because Cairo, as the capital, was a much bigger community.

In 1948, when Israel became an independent country, it became very unbearable to be a Jew in Egypt because of the hate of the Arabs toward the State of Israel, so we were really terribly persecuted there. For any little reason, we'd be arrested. For any little reason, we could be thrown in jail. We'd been spit at or insulted and things like that.

**That sounds very frightening.**

Yes, so for us, it was less possible to show that actually you are a Jew, so we lived in a non-religious status.

I got married in Egypt and had twins. My husband's father was German, but was born in Turkey, and he denounced his Turkish citizenship during World War II. So they came to Egypt and they were stateless—they

had to stay in Egypt as stateless residents. My husband did not have a nationality.

In 1956 there was the Suez Canal War. As Jews, we were not safe anymore in Egypt. We lost everything during the invasion. We had no country to call home anymore. At that time, France and Italy sent two ships for rescuing the people after the 1956 war, and we went to Italy, because I had an Italian passport at that time, and my husband at that time was stateless.

From Italy we were supposed to go to Israel. We were in a refugee camp at that time in Naples, Italy. We could not stay in Italy. The rabbi from Naples came to visit us and he asked us about our intentions. We said that our intention was not to stay in Italy anyway –we wanted to go to Israel. He was kind of surprised because we came from the fire and wanted to go back into another fire. But Israel was home for us.

While we were waiting for the papers to go to Israel, my husband went to work for the American Navy Base in Naples. There, he met the base rabbi and because it was Passover, he invited us over for the Seder at

the base. He was an American rabbi and he said, "Why don't you look into the opportunity to go to America?" We said, "We cannot go to America. We do not know anyone there. Our sole salvation is looking to Israel."

He decided to look into how we could come to America. He found out that at that time there was an agency, the HIAS, the Hebrew International Assistance Society, that would help Jews coming from underprivileged countries or countries that were at war. We went to Rome with our application and two years later we got accepted and came to America. I was so happy to be in America and so proud to become an American citizen. That was 1959.

At first, we went to Minneapolis, Minnesota, but it was too cold for us. We wanted to be somewhere where the weather was more like the Mediterranean climate where we came from, so we went to Los Angeles. We were introduced to a small Orthodox shul on Santa Monica Blvd. We started going there, but it was totally different than what we were used to, because they were Ashkenazic.



We then went to the Sinai Temple on Wilshire, because we lived across the street, but we didn't feel comfortable there either. After a year, we joined Tifereth Israel, a Sephardic temple, because our background was Sephardic. And then I started getting the taste of real Judaism.

### **How was it different?**

The service isn't different, but the bima is located in the center, and the chazan sings with more heart, and with more lament. And the food is totally different, more like what I was used to.

My husband and I divorced in 1970 and in the same year I met Nathan and fell in love again. We were married shortly afterwards.

We decided to move to Orange County and we joined the reform Temple Beth Tikvah in Fullerton. We were there for many years and I enjoyed savoring my Judaism, savoring my new finding. Then Nathan introduced me to Chabad.

**Nathan, why did you want to take Aurelia to Chabad?**

It's the old story that you can take the boy out of the country, but you cannot take the country out of the boy. I was raised in an observant home and remembered how I had felt Judaism all around me. When I came to the United States, I missed that Jewish atmosphere.

One Purim, I was invited to Rabbi Eliezrie's shul. The spirit was high, warm, happy and joyful! It was like I was back home in Israel!

Many years ago, they said that they were going to have the High Holiday services in the Yorba Linda Community Center, so I came. I liked Rabbi Eliezrie very much. His dedication to Judaism, his knowledge of the Torah and his acceptance of new people made me feel very comfortable. It took me back to my childhood years and I felt very much at home. I wanted to share those feelings with Aurelia. I know that Chabad has done more for Jewish recognition and helped Jews understand what Judaism is all about. I just felt very comfortable here.

Rabbi Eliezrie has charisma! He will tell you exactly what he thinks. He is an extremely talented speaker and writer. He has a burning desire and dream to build a Jewish community in North Orange County. He is a very committed Jew and teacher.

**Aurelia, what did you first think about going to this synagogue when Nathan brought you?**

At first, I did not want to come because I did not believe only what they believed. I don't believe in a mechitza, to sit separately from my husband in shul. I'm not a second-class citizen and I felt that women did not have the same class as the man – that women were supposed to have babies and serve the man.

Then slowly, slowly, from talking with Stella Eliezrie and talking to other people and coming and hearing Rabbi Eliezrie's talks and sermons, I found out that they do respect women. The woman counts very much and so I started coming and I found I liked it.

Now I come with Nathan and sometimes I come without him! It's hamish, very happy, very verbal, very emotional – everything we

wanted it to be. I feel comfortable because I think they accepted me the way I am. I don't have to be wearing a wig or wearing a long dress. I will never come in shul with pants or without a hat, but I respect them because they accepted me as I am. I didn't have to change. This is what makes me come to Chabad.

**Nathan, what do you think about what Aurelia said?**

I'm glad that she understands that they really do respect women. The Chabad followers hold the woman in very high esteem and respect, because the woman is responsible for bringing up the children and caring for the Jewish home. On Friday nights we bless our wife and give thanks to her. It's very nice because we should recognize our wife for her dedication and care.

**Do you think that the Rabbi will ever take down the mechitza?**

Never. Rabbi Eliezrie holds a high standard for observing the laws of the Torah. He is responsible to make sure that halacha is observed correctly. However, he also knows

that some of us live very far away and have to drive to come to shul and I think that the rabbi would rather have people drive to shul and be here, than not to come at all. Chabad permits flexibility as long as it stays within the halachah.

**What is it that you like about coming here for services?**

The service is different for me, because it's all in Hebrew, but I like the singing. I like the singing very much. And I like the topics. The rabbi has very good topics. He talks about family, religion, about the Bible. His talks are brief, but meaningful. We also attend classes here that deal with different aspects and values of Judaism. It is called the Jewish Learning Institute. The JLI provides many topics to discuss, such as Kabbalah, the holidays, the relationship between man and God, man and woman, marriage and many more.

**Do you want to say anything about how this shul is evolving?**

When we first came here, there was just this little, yellow house and we have many, fond memories of it. Slowly, they built this

beautiful sanctuary and now we are going to have a Jewish community center, Hebrew school building and the first mikvah in Orange County! The change is unbelievable! We have come so far, but still cherish our humble beginnings.

### **Why do you enjoy coming here?**

We love to be at Chabad, because it is so intimate and friendly. We feel very comfortable here. Just watching the progress that is occurring makes us feel more connected to this Jewish community. It feels like we are part of an extended family, our Jewish family. It's just like the Rabbi is building something in the middle of the desert and Jews are drawn to it from all around!