

JEWISH EDMONTON STORIES ONLINE

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

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I graduated in Dentistry and I wasn't too sure where I should go, to Beth Shalom or Beth Israel. Now the Beth Shalom was the Conservative synagogue and Beth Israel is an Orthodox synagogue. I attended Beth Shalom and a few services there and then went to Beth Israel. While I was there, Hersch Bookhalter said to me "You know I would like to form a Mister and Missus club for young married couples," and he said "Well nobody wants to do it,". So I said, "Okay, I'll do it". So, that's how I got started in the Beth Israel. We formed a Mister and Missus club, a lot of young fellows volunteered with me to help out. For every *yontif* we had a party. We had the sisterhood working with us, and they prepared the food. We would help out and for a whole year, everybody was celebrating for every holiday. Then I gave it over at that point, someone else took over, and needless to say, it didn't continue. There's a lot of work -- in fact, I was halfway through when I said, "Miriam," (that's my wife's name, Miriam) "I don't think I can do this anymore." She said, "We took a job, you got to finish it,". She was a real disciplinarian, so I did and everyone had a good time for that year, anyway.

One of the older members of Beth Israel told me "You know, someday you're gonna become president here,". Well guess what, it happened. I ended up being a president in about 1968. I've been a member of Beth Israel for many, many years -- on the board, chairman of the board of trustees, and I've been an executive for many, many years.

I was practicing dentistry, and a friend of mine, Dr. Mel Cassidy, said "I'm representing dentistry on the Alumni Council and I'm letting that go right now, how would you like to take my place?". Well, I'm a nice guy, I can't say no to Mel, so I took his place on the Alumni Council. I don't know if you know what the Alumni Council is -- it's a council with representatives from all the faculties of the University of Alberta; Medicine, Dentistry, Engineering, Education, etc. Every faculty has a representative there, and as I was there, Alex Marko was the executive director of the Alumni Council. After two years he said, "Bernie, how would you like to run for vice president of the Alumni Council?" Alex was a very, very nice friend of mine and I couldn't say no to him, so I said okay. There was someone opposite me running for the position. He had run the year before and normally the person that runs the year before wins, and the next person, which would be me,

gets in the next year. Well, I won! I won and I became the Vice President of the General Alumni Association and after that, the next year I became President of the General Alumni Association. I'm so proud of the fact that that year, when I was President of the Alumni Association, Dr. Myer Horowitz was the President of the university -- a Jewish president of the University of Alberta!

One of the accomplishments I made while President of the Alumni Association that I'm particularly proud of was that I received a letter from the Board of Governors (that's before I was on the Board of Governors, I was president at that time) stating that they were going to tear down Assiniboia Hall and Athabasca Hall. So let me explain what that's all about -- there were three residences at that time; one for ladies called Pembina Hall, Assiniboia Hall for men, and Athabasca Hall for men. The two men's residences were run down, the ladies' apparently wasn't run down as bad, and they were going to keep that residence. I, in my position said, "Well, I stayed at Athabasca Hall and we have an attachment to that building, I'd like to see if we can keep it." What they did do was tear up the insides and rebuild it and now, we have those two, all three of Pembina Hall, Assiniboia Hall, Athabasca Hall, side by side. They've formed what they call the "Alumni Walk". So they now have an "Alumni Walk", which goes through into the campus and that's because we saved that space. So at the university I enjoyed my time there and they don't forget the old past Presidents. I'm one of the oldest ones left alive I think, so when they have Christmas parties and other functions I'm always invited.

Because I was on the Senate at the university -- I don't think I mentioned that when I became President of the Alumni Council, I was ex officio on Senate at the university. When I was representing Dentistry on the Alumni Council I was also on Senate. I was responsible for helping Gene Forest get selected as a Chancellor of the University, so I had some input when I was there. Tevie Miller was a President of the General Alumni Association and I was the second one, and Myer Horowitz was the President of the University of Alberta. We also had another President before him.

I was also very active in B'nai Brith and we used to have our own meetings. I was active with Mizrahi too. We are very strong Zionists, we supported Israel. So in my background, I was always active in any cause involving Israel -- Mizrahi and the synagogue among others.

Being as I was on Senate, I had the honour of being able to go up to the head platform. When any convocation came along, I was invited (I'm invited to all the convocations). When my son

Marc graduated from Law, I was on head platform and shook his hand as he went across the stage. When my daughter Heather graduated in Education I was there to shake her and when she went across the stage. When my grandson Tal graduated I was there for him too. So I contend that if anybody I know is graduating, I can be on the head platform. All the professors and such march up the front stage, I can be with them. Now that I'm so much of a senior age, it's nothing left, I get pretty close to the President and the Chancellor.

I went to Hawaii for 35 years. We had our own condo in Hawaii on the 26th floor of the Waikiki Banyan, and it's been home away from home for two months. Because of my wife's condition, she couldn't go anywhere -- she might have developed a condition called Lewy Body Dementia. They say that with that kind of condition you only last for about three years. When Miriam was in the Capital Care Lynnwood I played the piano for her every day for seven years from four to five. I had somebody with her from nine to twelve and five to nine, and my share was from two to five. I entertained her every day and even when we had COVID-19 here, I had my son Marc, thank you Marc, get me an iPad and my daughter got me a proper iPhone so I got Spotify and I could play music for Miriam. She could hear all kinds of Jewish songs and she would have trouble eating so I would play songs for her and depending on her mood would depend the kind of music I would play for her. It kept her going for eight years. She just passed away the last day of Hanukkah; like the Hanukkah miracle she lasted until the last day *Hannukah*. My daughter Shirlann stayed with her for almost two weeks to be with her so she knew she was well loved.

Actually I was actually living with Reisa for a little while, when I was having my 90th birthday I was going to have a real bash. I was going to invite all the congregants from the Beth Israel. We're talking about having 125-250 people from family and visitors coming in. We were going to have about 250 for a lunch on Shabbos at the Beth Israel and Friday night supper at the Beth Israel. We were gonna have a brunch at the Fantasyland Hotel, so all the family were prepared to come in for our big simcha. Heather came in from Israel with two children -- with Avi who is now in the Israeli army and with Liat. They moved into the house and Tal came back and he was in the house, so when Reisa's husband had to have surgery on his knees it wasn't convenient for me to be there. That's when I moved here into the OPH [Our Parents' Home] -- we've got a very nice condo on the seventh floor looking out on 101st Street towards Jasper -- 119th Street at Jasper. We can have kosher meals here, which is significant, and they recently sold the building to Revera and they're keeping up the kosher meals; whoever wants kosher meals can

have it. They've got all kinds of programs and I started a program of Jewish music on Sunday. I don't have very much attendance, but I have a few and I'm going to play the piano for them.

On Thursday they have an hour where you can have a drink and entertainment. Before, I would always come to the Bliss Baked Goods with Shirlann. I'd be there from about 5:00 to 7:30 and she'd always have me there. It was comforting because I was there and we'd go leave at the same time. But after I moved into the OPH I wasn't there anymore. Now we have our grandson Tal, Tal stays now with Shirlann. You're talking about food -- I get kosher meals five days a week for suppers and Shirlann provides me with suppers for Saturday and Sunday. And now, I've been going to their house also for supper on weekends, so I'm getting fat. I've got so much food. And of course those spaces, you know they're so good, but they also prepare a lot of good food.

As well, I was on the board of the Jewish Drop-In Centre for many years and I was involved in them quite extensively, but in the last few years I haven't been as active anymore. In the Drop-In Centre we had a real wonderful program growing at the Drop-In Centre. We had a lady called Bojina and she was wonderful as a cook. She cooked very good meals and for every holiday that came along we had good attendance. In fact, we would have some plays that the local -- I was in the original choir of the Beth Israel synagogue and I was in the choir at the Drop-In Centre for many years, so I was actually with the Drop-In Centre but the last few years, not so much.

When they came to ask me to be an honoree [for the Negev dinner] I said "Surely you can find somebody more worthy of the honor," and they told me, "No, no, we want you." Well guess what, they had a fantastic turnout. I forgot to tell you that on Shabbos in the synagogue, I was giving out chocolate kisses to all the congregants. I started only with a smaller group of men, friends of mine and then Dr. Beck wrote a poem about me, "The Candy Man" in the Beth Israel Bulletin, so the secret was out. Everybody knew I was a candy man, so all the men that came to synagogue from then on they all got a handshake and a kiss from me. Then there also two ladies, special ladies, that I also gave chocolate kisses to. So when I had the Negev Gala, I had a lot of people, maybe they felt that since they gave him all those kisses they were gonna come and honor me. We had a real good turnout and I suggested having the gala party at the Beth Israel Synagogue. That was the first time they did that and it turned out to be a real success. At Beth Israel synagogue we've got a real nice dining hall and we had a wonderful function there. They asked what would I like to have my choice for my being an honoree of the Negev Gala and

I chose Rebuilder of the Jerusalem Wall. So they raised a lot of money helping to reconstruct the Jerusalem Wall. They have a plaque in Israel of all the donors and my children that have been there have seen that plaque. So my name is in Israel, I have a connection to Jerusalem. Now my name is on the wall in Jerusalem, I think maybe Hashem is looking down on me from there.

I met Miriam and I said "I want a date with you every Saturday night if that's okay". I set a date because that's a Saturday off and she agreed. All the other Jewish boys were trying to date her on a Saturday night and she wouldn't go because she agreed to go with me which was my lucky day. In those days, we used to have a dance, a Yom Kippur dance, after Yom Kippur services at the Beth Shalom. I didn't ask Miriam to come to it with me and this lady Mrs. Spevakow. that's the house where she was living in now, asked me when I came for the date "Who are you taking to the Yom Kippur dance?". I told her "Miriam, of course", to myself I thought it was a silly question. Well Mrs. Spevakow had to get Miriam all dressed up -- she didn't know if I was taking her to the dance. She got nice shoes and a nice dress, and there was another fella staying in the house hoping I wasn't going to take her because he would have liked to take Miriam to the dance. I'm getting along the sideline, but anyway we had a nice dance and I've enjoyed my life with Miriam. We were married for 65 years, 65 years, and we have a letter from the Queen of England, thanks to my son Marc. He'd sent a letter out to England for a certificate for 65 years of marriage, so I have that certificate and also from the Premier and Prime Minister so I have souvenirs of 65 years. Miriam lasted just another three months after our 65th anniversary, she passed away on the last day of Hanukkah.

I'll tell you a story when I turned 83 Rabbi Friedman said, "Bernie, you should have a second *Bar Mitzvah*." I said, "how can I have a second *Bar Mitzvah*?". Well if you live to 70 years of age and if you live another 13 years, then you qualify for a second *Bar Mitzvah*. Oh well I'm not that smart, I didn't know Hebrew that well. He asked me to show him how well I could read Hebrew. So I read something from the Siddur and he said "Oh that's Talmud Torah level,". I said "I don't think I can do it," but my grandson, that's Shirlann's son Shmuel, by the way Shmuel is in Israel right now. He's going to Yeshiva, and he is six foot three, he's a big boy. He's a very smart one too, he's been in charge in the Yeshiva where he was in the kitchen and he would do the Torah reading. He was responsible for making sure that the reading was done every Shabbos and if there was no one there to do it, he did it. Can you imagine doing that, all of it going on the Haftorahs, amazing. So Rabbi Friedman said he could do the Haftarah for my Bar Mitzvah and

Tal said he'd find the melody for my prayers. He put that on my computer, so for two months while I was in Hawaii, I was studying the *nusach*, the melody for the prayers before and after the reading of the *maftir*. So guess what? I told Rabbi Friedman "Yes thank you very much, I'm going to have a second Bar Mitzvah," and I did. So I had a second Bar Mitzvah and we had a big turnout at Beth Israel and we all celebrated. Rabbi Friedman was a good friend of mine and I surprised him. In fact Shmuel says to me "Zaida, I'm very proud of you. I couldn't have done any better myself."