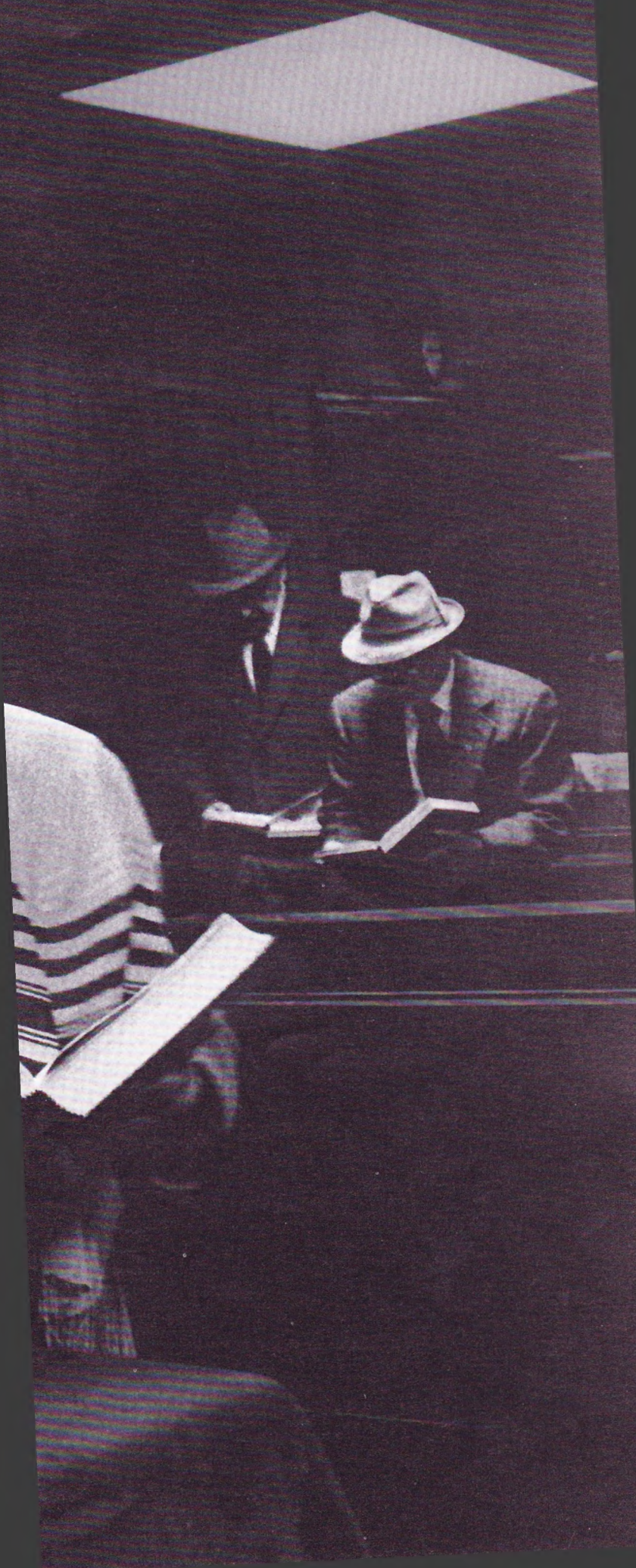


MAKING MINYAN

BY JENNIFER FREED
PHOTOGRAPHY BY R. TODD HOFFMAN





BUDDY COMES AT four-thirty every afternoon to open up the place. First the key in the shiny padlock that fastens the rusting iron fence, then briskly across the lawn, up the four brick steps to fit another key into the high double doors. Eli has come too—Buddy always drives Eli here, and someone else drives him home—but Buddy neither slows his pace to match the older man’s, nor waits the extra minute to hold the door.

He says he is in charge of opening up the synagogue because “I live near, up the hill.” He looks down for a moment at the keys in his hand, then adds, “Other people have keys, but I don’t know when they’re coming. Wouldn’t want our customers to get discouraged.”

He pulls the door open to a long dim hallway. At its end a low table holds a basket of round, satin caps: yarmulkas. Buddy puts one on. Eli keeps on his baseball cap. He shuffles past to a closet, takes out a broom, returns outside to sweep scattered leaves and pine needles from the front steps.

Across from the table, on the right, is the door Buddy wants. He enters, switching on the fluorescent ceiling lights, then walks up the aisle between six pairs of benches to the ark, a wooden cabinet set against the front wall. He slides open its small door, revealing the embroidered velvet curtain that hides the Torah, the Five Books of Moses. Then he switches on the electric menorah. Six lightbulbs glow orange, illuminating the Star of David at their center. Then back into the hall, to turn on the two outside lamps “so people know we’re here.”

“Here” is the Etz Chaim Synagogue in Portland, a three story brick building standing back from Congress Street in the shade of tall pine trees. Passersby would not notice this place. They would notice the parking lot to its left, Tommy’s Hardware Store to its right, and perhaps, between them, a few yards of high shrubbery reaching above and through an iron fence. They would have no reason to turn and look through the gate; the traffic is heavy, the bus stop nearby, Levinsky’s clothing store across the street. People in this part of the neighborhood are on their way somewhere else: into a store or out of one, to a church or an

Italian restaurant or up Munjoy Hill, toward the old immigrant neighborhoods and the Eastern Promenade, with its tennis courts and ocean view.

The synagogue’s name means “Tree of Life.” On its back and sides, sheets of metal siding imitate bricks. Their red paint has weathered off in specks and chunks, revealing the blue-grey of metal below. The windows are arched, colored along their rims with sections of stained glass. In back, one of the third floor windows is broken, boarded over from inside.

“ABRAHAM WAS ARGUING WITH GOD ABOUT SODOM AND GOMORRAH. GOD SAID, ‘IF YOU CAN FIND TEN RIGHTEOUS PEOPLE, I WON’T DESTROY.’ AND ABRAHAM DIDN’T HAVE THE CHUTZPAH TO GO BELOW THAT.”

Right: Walkway to Etz Chaim Synagogue, Congress Street, Portland.

INSIDE, ten men congregate every afternoon, sitting in the long, narrow room on the first floor.

The “regulars” in the group are Buddy and Dean and Ben and David, Danny and Morris, Herbie and Eli, and Maurice, the one they call their leader. None is under 65. Buddy is wry, Dean is quiet, David is ninety. Maurice likes teaching. Ben likes people. Eli sweeps the steps. Herbie collects music. Morris came from

a synagogue that was torn down. Danny’s father helped found this one.

“We have practically a minyan if everybody shows up,” Herbie says, referring to the quorum needed to hold the prayer service. Ten men make a minyan. Ten men, at least, must be present for group prayer. Group prayer is a mitzvah, a commandment.

“You’ve heard of Sodom and Gomorrah?” Maurice explains. “God told Abraham that He’s going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. And so Abraham started to argue with him. He says, ‘God, what if You find fifty righteous people there?’

“And so God said to him, ‘Well, if I find fifty, I won’t destroy it.’

“But Abraham started to have second thoughts. He says, ‘My God, what if there aren’t fifty? What if You have forty?’

“God says, ‘All right, for forty I’ll let it go, too.’

“And he finally got God down to ten. And God said, ‘Yeah, if you find ten righteous people, I won’t destroy.’ And Abraham didn’t have the chutzpah to go below that, because I guess he said to himself, ‘Look, if there aren’t ten people there, what the hell

[is the] point of the whole thing?’ And this is one of the rationals for the—would you believe?—for having the official quorum of ten people.”

But there are only nine men in this group today. What do they do for the tenth? What do they do when not all of them can come?

“Well we call next door, across the street, or B & B,” Herbie says. “That makes ten.” He means Jeffrey, from the hardware store next door, Phil Levinsky and his sons from the clothing store across the street, and Gary Berenson of B & B Cleaners, a block away.

And then there’s Sam, who comes most Saturdays, and Richard, who also comes Saturdays, and Sid, who comes when he can.

And Stevie, who calls every evening from his investment office to see if they need him.

Stevie is Morris’ nephew. Richard is David’s nephew. Buddy and Dean are cousins. David and Maurice are second cousins. Morris invited Herbie over.

Few of them came daily when they were younger. Some didn’t come at all. A different, older group of men

were the “regulars.” Several in the present group came once in a while, when they were needed to help make minyan. As the older men died, they filled in. Now they call on others to fill in.

“If a stranger walks in, fine,” Herbie says. “If not, we call a few people. Slosberg comes once in a while. What’s his name used to come quite a lot. The guy that just died. Hy—What the hell was his last name?”

Before Hy, in April, another man died—someone, Stevie says, who used to bring his brother when he came. “So that’s two gone right there.”

When enough have gone, they won’t be able to make minyan regularly. They can still pray, of course, but not as a group. “I mean you can walk down the street and pray if you want to,” David’s nephew Richard says. “Or under a cherry tree or an oak tree. You don’t even have to be in a synagogue. But, in Jewish tradition, there are . . . certain prayers which are said at certain times, only when there’s a group together, a group of ten males, adults.”

So each day they come, and each day they are not certain that they will have enough men for the service.

“It’s a problem,” David says, “a problem that’s going to have to be dealt with, and recognized, before too very long.” He smiles gently at the allusion to his

own age. He is the oldest of them all. “One by one the congregation dwindles away, and there’s no future. We’re holding our breath.”

THEY SIT, WAITING for a minyan, in the same places every day, chatting, checking the hospital list, sharing news. And then, at five o’clock, they pray. “And these words which I command you this day shall be in your heart,” they read in the prayer book. “You shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall speak of them when you are sitting at home and when

you go on a journey, when you lie down and when you rise up.” (Deuteronomy 6:6-7).

Dean usually walks in soon after Buddy opens up. Straight back, silver hair, face tanned and taut. He doesn’t replace his fedora with a yarmulka. His head is covered; that is sufficient.

Morris also arrives around four-thirty. Eli grins at them child-like, a broad smile of

hello, from his bench along the side wall. He mumbles something, lisping slightly, and falls into a steady stream of rambling.

Buddy turns toward his cousin. “Where’s the papers, Dean?”

Dean pulls the folded newspaper from under his arm, drops it on Buddy’s bench. “Delivered.”

“Paid on delivery.”

Thirty-five cents pass from Buddy’s hand to Dean’s. “Did you see the doctor today?”

Dean’s voice is low, hoarse. “I did. He looks good.”

“Oh does he? And how’s his health?”

Dean has cancer of the vocal chords. After three operations, he has been getting radiation treatment. “When I play ball, I do a lot of yelling,” he says. “I used to get laryngitis every summer, and at the end of every summer it would go away.” A pause. “Last summer it didn’t go away.”

“So you going to the game anyway?” Morris asks.

“Oh yeah.”

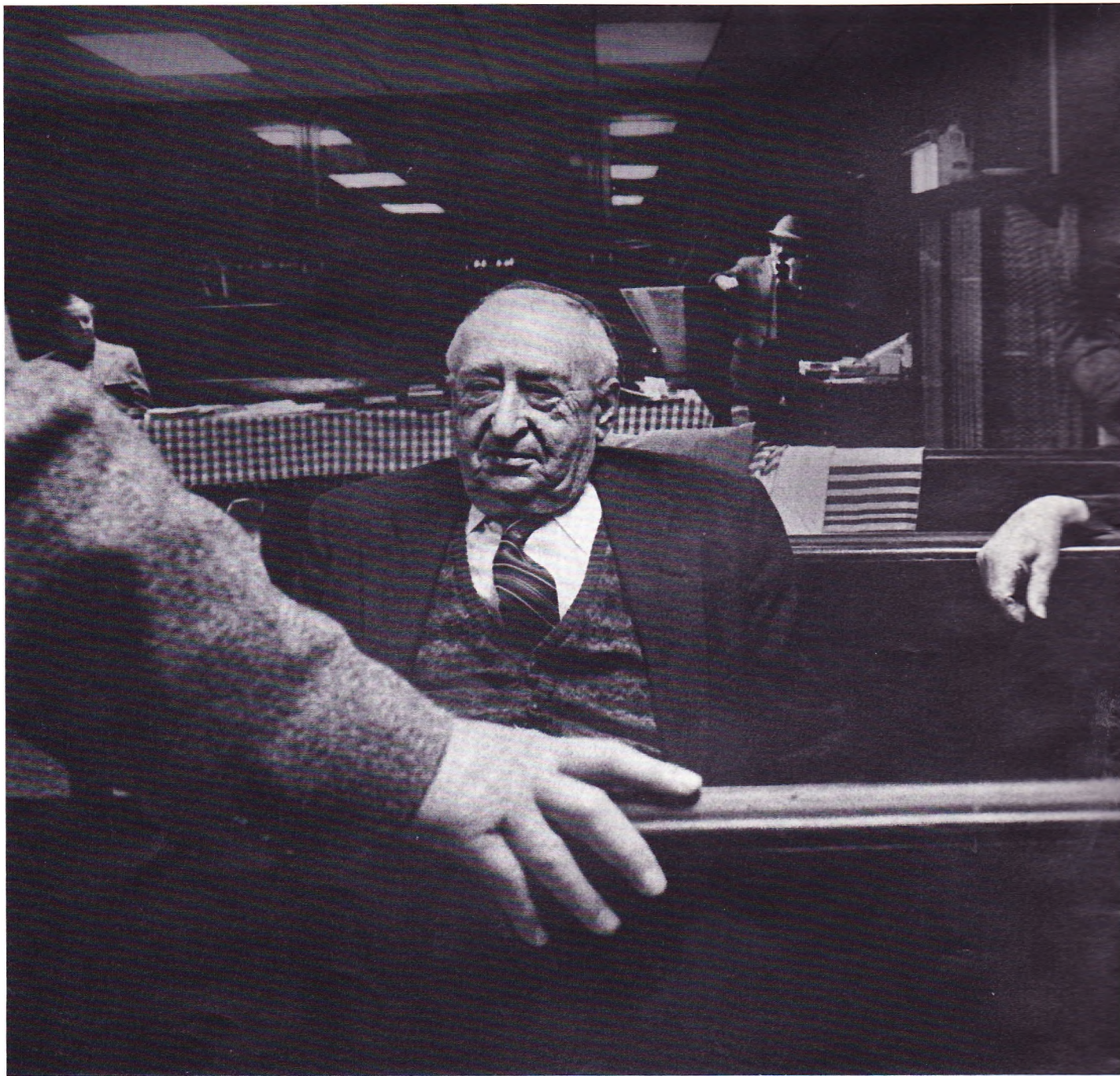
“What time are they playing?”

“Six fifteen.”

“So we gotta have a minyan on time tonight.”

The service is supposed to start at five o’clock. They have fifteen minutes.





Above: "Babe," David and others wait for the tenth man.

Danny and Herbie come in and take yarmulkas from the basket by the door. Danny glances from face to face, breathing deeply through puckered lips, counting with his eyes. A heart attack some time ago has left him short of breath. He doesn't talk for long before he stops to breath again.

Herbie counts out loud. "One, two, three. . . five. Oh, you gotta make some calls, Buddy."

No one has official positions here, but people have their roles. Buddy's is to telephone. He has inherited the part of caretaker, and it is his job to clean the

building, to lock and unlock it each day, to make sure they have a minyan.

He heads toward the desk at the back of the room—an old wooden office desk, its surface cluttered by stacks of deteriorating prayer books, a pile of dated telephone directories, folded paper bags. A black rotary phone sits in its corner, next to a small vase holding a brown and wilted flower.

"Maybe Maurice'll come." Herbie says. "He hasn't been here for two days."

"He's been on business," Buddy answers. "He's



not here yet, so he's not coming." He picks up the receiver and dials a number from memory.

"Hello, would you be available for a minyan today? Yuh. Well I don't think Maurice is coming. That makes eight."

He hangs up. "Jeffrey will be available," he says to no one in particular. They are involved in their own conversations.

"You think Pete Rose'll get back into baseball?"

"Doubt it."

"Why, just because he cheated on his income tax?"

Everyone does that."

Jeffrey walks in, puts a purple yarmulka on his thick brown hair, and sits next to Eli, listening but saying little.

"Oh, I saw a fellow at Shop 'n Save today. He called me by name. I didn't recognize him."

"You mean you couldn't tell by voice?"

"Didn't you ask?"

"No, I didn't. I was tryin' to figure it out."

"I usually keep 'em talkin' till I can figure it out."

The telephone rings. Buddy answers. "Can you make it tonight? Okay, you can make it some other night."

A few minutes before five o'clock, a muffled bang comes from the hall, the sound of the outer door falling closed.

Buddy hears it. "Well, here comes another candidate for sainthood."

Ben enters, glances around the room. "How many we got today?" He counts by the clusters of men, leaning to see who's sitting in the benches. "Two, five—"

"We got twelve," Herbie says with a straight face.

"Twelve?" Ben seems surprised. "Two, five, seven. Why you tell me twelve, we got seven?"

He touches his Red Sox hat, decides to keep it on. Herbie doesn't bother to explain. He accepts his joke as lost.

David pushes open the door and walks to his bench in front of Eli. He has a back that wants to make him stoop, and a long, white-haired head that he holds up straight. "How are you today?" he says as he passes Danny. His voice is even, modulated, his diction clear. He speaks like a gentleman.

The various conversations grow quiet. Buddy glances at the clock above the door.

"Five o'clock and all is not well."

"Doesn't look good."

Morris walks slowly to the cabinet and pulls out a stack of prayer books to pass out. They have not made minyan. One short.

Silence. The sound of breathing and pages turning. Morris stands. Others stand when they, too, have reached the appropriate place. Voices now and then, quietly speaking the Hebrew words.

Suddenly Richard pushes through the doors, a big man with a big voice. He still wears his dark suit, straight from his law office on Exchange Street.

"I'm only here because I had to pick up my shoes," he says with a laugh. "Otherwise you wouldn't see me." Others chuckle with him, but his uncle does not.

"I don't like to hear that explanation," David says, his tone slightly stern, like a parent's to an impolite child.

But Richard has made minyan. They can have a service.

“WHO’S GONNA read today?” “Gary did yesterday.” “Eli, you do afternoon service.” “Herbie, want to do evening?” Everyone’s head is covered. Six yarmulkas, three baseball caps, one fedora.

Today is a week day. Not the Sabbath. Not the new year by the Hebrew lunar calendar (Rosh Hashanah), or the day of atonement (Yom Kippur), or the first day of a new month (Rosh Hodesh). Not a particular holy day of any sort. So today they do not open the ark to read from the Torah. They open their prayer books, say the words they said yesterday and the day before, without any of the special words for the holy days.

Eli shuffles to the front of the room and stands at the lectern, his back to the congregation, facing the ark. He reads aloud quickly, in Hebrew, racing through the words. The others read along in silence, each at his own speed, sometimes muttering the words softly. Then silence from Eli as he joins the rest in reading to himself. A moment later everyone stands, and then everyone speaks out loud together.

Then they sit. Stand. Sit. Silence. Speech. They do not all speak or stand in unison. They do not all always stand.

They read the Shemoneh Esreh. “The Shemoneh Esreh is recited in silent devotion while standing, facing east,” the prayer book explains in a small English caption. “The Reader repeats the Shemoneh Esreh aloud when a minyan holds service.”

East because that is the direction of Jerusalem.

Spoken aloud by Eli because he is the reader.

In Hebrew:

“When I proclaim the name of the Lord, give glory to our God.” (Deuteronomy 32:3).

“O Lord, open thou my lips, that my mouth may declare thy praise.” (Psalm 51:17).

Richard’s voice is the loudest as he mutters the prayer to himself, his words coming out in a singsong chant. He rocks slightly, forward and back, forward and back, as he reads.

They say the Kedushah. “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; The whole earth is full of his glory.”

A voice whispers, a paper rustles, a prayer book is put down and a Hebrew-English dictionary picked up.

And the Tahanun. “O Lord, punish me not in thy anger; chastise me not in thy wrath. Have pity on me, O Lord.” (Psalm 6).

Ben forgets his place. He flips the pages in his prayer book, backwards, forwards, back again. Herbie leans over and turns to the right page, points with his finger.

“Right there, see? Okay?”

“Oh, yeah, yeah.” Ben remembers and follows along again.

Stevie pushes open the door with a force that shows he has come in a hurry. He is surprised to see the service has already begun; he wasn’t needed for the

minyan. Holding *The New York Times* under one arm, he puts on a yarmulka and goes to stand next to his Uncle Morris. They whisper for a moment. A few minutes later he wanders toward the back of the room, looks at the calendar hanging on the wall, walks out the door. No one seems to notice his departure, but after the service Danny turns to Jeff.

“You weren’t very alert.”

“What’d I do?”

“When Stevie came in, you should have gone like this.” He mimes, holding his head up and his prayer book out, indicating that Jeff should have given his own book to Stevie and taken the opportunity to leave.

Jeff laughs. “Oh, my soul needs cleansing anyway.”

They do not linger for conversation when the service is over. Buddy hurries them on. He wants to be on his way. “On the way out,” he says, and they oblige, walking in ones and twos, Buddy jingling the keys and turning off the lights behind them. Their cars are next door, in the small parking lot where a wooden sign proclaims in red letters, “Parking for Levinsky’s Shoppers Only. All Others Towed Immediately at Owner’s Expense.”

THE ETZ CHAIM SYNAGOGUE is the only one still functioning in the eastern end of the Portland peninsula, an area where once there were three. Once, at the beginning of this century, people called this area “Little Jerusalem” and “The Jerusalem of the North.” There were Jewish bakeries, kosher butcheries, and rabbis who walked from house to house on the Sab-



bath to teach the children. The children's first language was Yiddish, the language of their parents and grandparents, a mixture of medieval German dialects with Hebrew and bits and pieces of other languages as well, the languages of the places from which they had come—Lithuania, Poland, Latvia, Russia.

They began settling in Portland in the 1860s. Sixty families lived there by the 1880s, six hundred families by the 1920s. In the 1940s a small group formed a less traditional congregation. By World War II, the Jewish community had begun to disperse, drifting out toward the suburbs and beyond, toward affluence and assimilation.

When the people left the area, one of the synagogues followed them, moving to a new building in the Woodford's Corner neighborhood. One was eventually torn down, replaced by a parking lot. Etz Chaim stayed.

When they were building the synagogue in the early 1920s, they modeled it after the synagogues of Eastern Europe. Women bathed each month in the mikvah, the ritual bath, across the hall from where the men meet now. Families climbed the double staircase at the end of the hall, up to the meeting room on the second floor, up another flight for the women, to the third floor balcony. Men and women sat separately, so that prayer would be without distractions.

The meeting room takes up the whole second floor, a grand, wide, wood-paneled place with curved rows of polished benches. The benches were filled every Sabbath. The youngest children played while their mothers tried to keep them quiet. Older children, the boys, sat with their fathers. Sixty years ago, Maurice came with his father. "I used to sit down here and look at the girls up there, even though it was against the rules, against the law." Some of the others, too, came as children. Danny and Dean and Ben and Buddy. Some of their fathers were among the founders.

On the High Holidays, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, every member of the synagogue came. Three hundred or 350 families, Maurice says, and "all the young kids would go, for the service, but also to see each other." All through the service they would visit, back and forth, in a constant flow between this synagogue and Shaarey Tphiloh, the synagogue a few blocks away on Newbury Street.

In the '50s and '60s Gary Berenson of B & B Cleaners came as a child. "It was fun with the third floor. You could play up there. All the kids were running around." Still at that time, for High Holidays at least, he remembers people filling the room, full enough that the youngest children couldn't find a place to sit upstairs with their mothers.

Now the air smells of dust and emptiness. A ceiling cuts the stairway off in mid-flight, sealing up the third floor balcony "in the interest of conserving energy," Maurice says. People use the room only for the High Holidays. Twice a year. Twenty people come. Maybe thirty.

"For everything else, even Passover and the other festivals, they stay in the small room on the first floor. They have no reason not to.

"Why bother, when there's plenty room down here?" Dean asks. "It'd be a waste. Light, heat—everything."

"People don't turn out anymore," Maurice says. "At best we have 12, 13 people. It's endemic." He pauses. "Like the Masons.

"That's the only thing that's unfortunate about this place," he says later. "That there are so few of us to enjoy it."

WE DISTINGUISH between Shabbat and the rest of the week," Maurice Rubinoff says. "We call Shabbat holy, and even though we don't call the rest of the week profane, it doesn't have the same amount of sanctity."

On the Sabbath they read the Torah. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. The record of the Israelites, the words Moses brought down from Mount Sinai, the laws of moral and physical conduct—613 commandments given by God to the people of Israel.

"[Torah] means the scrolls, [and] it means the entire compendium of Jewish knowledge," David's nephew Richard says. "In Jewish tradition throughout the ages, since the time of the destruction of the temple, the way of preserving the Jewish religion, and Jewish life, was to study the religious writings."

The scribes who write the Torah scrolls must use indelible ink on special parchment, transcribing from a model text, copying the Hebrew exactly as it was

**"WHO'S GONNA READ
TODAY?"
"GARY DID YESTERDAY."
EVERYONE'S HEAD
IS COVERED.
SIX YARMULKAS,
THREE BASEBALL CAPS
AND ONE FEDORA.**

Left: Reading the prayer book.

originally written. The people who read it to the congregation take care not to mispronounce, not to skip a single word, to read with respect.

On the Sabbath the men meet in the morning. Sam comes—he is “a Saturday regular”—and Arthur and Sid come as well. Their presence makes up for the men who for some reason couldn’t come today.

Today’s service is longer, more formal. No sneakers, no sport shirts, no baseball hats. Today they wear yarmulkas, suit jackets, ties. They shake hands, smiling, saying, “Good Shabbos. Good Shabbos.” And they take the prayer shawls from where they hang folded over the back of each bench, drape them over their shoulders, smooth the long fringes.

“I am enwrapping myself in the fringed garment,” the prayer book says, “in order to fulfill the command of my Creator, as it is written in the Torah: ‘They shall make fringes for themselves on the corners of their garments throughout the generations.’”

Eli opens the morning service, leading the group in the traditional blessings, the prayer for the dead, the psalms. No sounds but rustling paper, Eli speaking the last line of each psalm aloud, the whisperings of Hebrew as the men read along to themselves.

Then speech, standing, sitting, a song: Feet tap out the beat. Voices do not quite blend. One person breaks for a breath. Another finishes a line early.

“That doesn’t sound like the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, you know that?” Sid whispers as they finish.

“I thought it sounded like the Shaarey Tphiloh Choir. What’s his name, the leader...?”

Dean turns in his bench six feet away, whispers the name over his shoulder.

Eli continues, “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the children of Israel and tell them to make for themselves fringes” (Numbers, 15:37, 38).

Each man takes the corner fringes of his prayer shawl, brings them to his mouth, kisses them.

“You shall have it as a fringe, so that when you look upon it you will remember to do all the commands of the Lord.”

Again they kiss their shawls. One more time Eli reads the word “fringes,” and one more time the men kiss them, and kiss again with the last line of the prayer, “I am the Lord your God.”

When the time has come to remove the Torah scrolls from the ark, all the men stand. Eli carries the scrolls up the aisle and back, pausing for each of them to kiss his shawl, touch it to the Torah.

Maurice Rubinoff reads the Torah every Sabbath because he is the one who knows how. It is written, as it was three thousand years ago, in a Hebrew with no vowels and no punctuation. Maurice has studied enough to know what the groups of consonants mean, where each sentence begins, where it ends.

“I have an expression that I maybe use too much,”

he says. “It’s a French expression: *Un royaume des aveugles, les borgnes sont les rois*. In the kingdom of the blind, a man with one eye is a big shot. So I happen to be the man with one eye.”

He was not always a good student. “When I was going to Hebrew school, I was voted the one least likely to succeed. I resisted education, would you believe, even at the college level.” But his grandfather was a rabbi. And later, after he married, he taught for fifteen years in the community Hebrew school.

“. . . And so they point me out as their surrogate rabbi,” Maurice says. “Except that I don’t push it. My philosophy has always been, if we have people, if we have resources here other than me who can do it, I prefer that they do it. In areas where they can’t, like the Torah reading, that I do. But I like to spread it around. It’s the only way.”

Together he and Ben work with the heavy scroll, rolling up one end and unrolling the other until they get to the day’s reading. Each week they take another chapter, going in order, finishing the whole five books at the end of the Hebrew year. But “nothing is cast in concrete among us,” Maurice says. “There’s a group of Jews who takes three years to go through it.”

Today Ben and David stand at the front with Maurice, one on each side, acting as the monitors to correct him should he make any mistakes. He chants out the reading in a singsong rhythm, breaking into English every so often to translate because, “When you read the Torah, you’re not reading for your health. You’re reading to educate the people.”

Everyone in the group knows Hebrew, but Maurice wants to be sure no one gets lost. So he paraphrases.

“He reminds them they were down in the desert. Reminds them, ‘You’re coming to a land which has everything—plenty of land, plenty of water, plenty of oil—except fuel oil.’”

A few chuckles. The service continues. Reading, paraphrasing, reading, paraphrasing. Ben’s hearing aid whistles. In one of the back benches, two of the men hold a whispered conversation.

Then it is time to call people up to the front of the room to say the blessings over the Torah. Maurice calls them according to the list Dean made before the service began—“the batting order”—names recorded week after week on the same paper so everyone will have a turn.

Between turns, waiting for another person to walk up to the Torah, those at the lectern speak among themselves.

“I was in the hospital the other day.”

“You all right?”

“Yeah, what I have to do is cater to it.”

“Cater?”

“Stop eating, stop drinking—”

“Have to lose any weight?”

"Not much. Forty pounds or so."

An hour into the service, the door opens and a twelfth man walks in: Mr. Lerner, who comes to the service when visiting his summer home in Maine. He whispers his greetings as he passes the benches. "Good Shabbos. Good Shabbos—How's Julia? Good Shabbos." Then it is his turn to go to the front of the room, say the blessing, stand for a few minutes beside Maurice, looking on as he continues to read, translate, read.

"You shouldn't say to yourself, 'I'm such a tzaddik [righteous man] that God did this for me, it's my due.'"

"It's because of God's promise to our forefathers, so it's not because of you."

"We're a stiff-necked people, a bunch of bums. Listen, really, we're all people."

Several lines later Maurice interrupts himself, moves to speak over his shoulder without turning his back to the ark. "Very interesting passage here. It was at that time that God separated the tribe of Levi from all the other tribes. Said you won't have an inheritance—"

"Portion," Sam corrects him from a front bench.

"Portion, that's a better word, in the new land. Right."

And so the service goes on. One man comes up to the Torah, one returns to his seat. Stopping, shaking hands on the way, Herbie walks back up the aisle. "Good Shabbos. Good Shabbos," he says softly as he takes people's hands. Eli's head has drooped to rest on his chest. "Eli's sleepin'," Herbie says to no one in particular. "Don't wake 'im."

"You better be mighty careful you don't go against the will of God," Maurice continues.

"You teach your children when they're at home, when they're at school, when they're up in Bethel—"

David stops him as he reads the Hebrew, says something quietly. Maurice rereads the Hebrew, correcting himself. "See, you do pretty good, David."

After the Torah reading, David stays at the front of the room to sing the Haftorah, the passage from the Prophets. He stands still for the song, hands resting on the lectern, shoulder blades showing through the back of his jacket. He was trained as a cantor, and his voice is still rich and resonant. Every Friday evening, for the welcoming of the Sabbath, he is the one who sings the special service. He only needs a few lozenges to moisten his throat, and then his voice carries through.

When David has finished, when thanks for the Torah and the Prophets and this Sabbath day have been given, when the Torah has been replaced in the ark and the day's commentary on the reading has been given, the service ends. It is time to eat.

They share their Sabbath morning meal at the table at the back of the room. Styrofoam plates and cups. A bottle of wine, seldom touched. Two bottles of Polar ginger ale, usually emptied. Potato chips, crackers, chopped white fish, pickled herring. A coffee cake with the Shop 'n Save bakery label on the box. Talk of

politics, plans, the past week.

"Pass the horse radish."

The man across the table hands over the open jar and its cover. "I'm a structuralist."

"Right. What's a jar without a cover?"

"So he said to me, 'I hear you drive on the Sabbath.'"

"I said, 'Well, you do what you have to do.' Turned out he wasn't judging. He wanted a ride."

Buddy has already left for the day. Maurice locks up the place and they walk

out to their cars, to the rest of the weekend. No meeting Sunday. "Give the boys a rest," Maurice says. They'll be back again Monday.

**"FIVE O'CLOCK AND
ALL IS NOT WELL."
THEY HAVE NOT MADE
MINYAN. ONE SHORT.
SUDDENLY RICHARD
PUSHES
THROUGH THE DOOR.
RICHARD HAS MADE
MINYAN. NOW THEY CAN
HAVE A SERVICE.**

ON THE WALL IN the room where they meet for services, next to the desk, hangs an engraved plaque dedicated to Harry S. Judelshon: "In recognition of his generous voluntary service for over twenty-five years in leading our prayer services and reading the Torah on Sabbath and Holidays. May 31, 1982."

Harry Judelshon "wasn't a rabbi," Buddy says, "but he knew as much as any rabbi."

"There's nothing sanctified about the word rabbi," Maurice explains. "The word rabbi simply means 'rabbi, my teacher.' And that's the real function of a rabbi, not to participate in Bar Mitzvahs or weddings."

The plaque was presented to Mr. Judelshon sometime near his death, but Buddy isn't sure exactly when that was. He turns toward the benches where Morris and Dean sit. "When'd he die?"

"Before we gave that to him, wasn't it?"

"No, he was in the Home. They found it in his office after."

Danny pushes open the door to the room and walks

in, puckering his lips and breathing through them. "Hey, when'd Judelshon die, do you remember?"

"Thirteen Tammuz."

"Good, he knows the month," Buddy says. "The year?"

Danny goes to the table at the back of the room, moves a book, turns pages in a notepad. "5,745."

"What year is it now?" Morris asks.

Buddy pulls a small pocket calendar out of his jacket, looks at the year on the cover. "5,750."

MAURICE WALKS ACROSS THE room, past the back table and the cluttered desk, to take one of the old books from the shelves built into the back wall. The oldest of them came here from Europe, carried by the first immigrants over 100 years ago. They fill the shelves, wide leather-bound volumes resting against each other at a slant. Volumes written in Hebrew, their pages thin and yellowed, worn from years of fingers tracing their lines. Volumes of the Torah, commentaries on the Torah, commentaries on the commentaries, scholars arguing with scholars across time.

"Look, some things you can't get an agreement on," Maurice often says. "That's the nature of the world. One of the beautiful things about the Jewish faith is there's room for debate. It's not like communism."

In the past, these books held the people's education, their culture, their law, their religion. "In the Old Country you couldn't go to a non-Jewish public school anyways," Maurice says. "They didn't take the Jews into the universities."

But in America things changed for them, and over the years, their habits changed. The prayer books show the process. First the text all in Hebrew, then in Hebrew with directions in English, and now, for every Hebrew page, a page of English.

The men who come now are, as David says, "run of the mill Jewish people. Liberal type Jewish people. Which doesn't mean that they have to go over to the shul [school] three times a day like a religious Jew would insist, and study the Gemara, the Laws."

"These boys want a service, and support a service," Maurice says, "but they don't want it to be a millstone around their neck."

He laughs. "We don't [have a rabbi], and the boys are happier without one, because you know, having a rabbi sometimes can become a little bit impressive. There's nobody [here] making long speeches, nobody's dragging out the service."

"So you see," David says, "you're dealing with a peculiar situation: People who while they want to perpetuate themselves realize that they're not going to. It's kind of sad, you know? After so many years...."



He pauses a moment, then continues. "This is life, this is progress. I suppose this is a development of generations, and all the things that go with them. Like saying a person died from natural causes. What are natural causes? The inherent decay that takes place as life goes on."

Now it is only a question of how long they will last, whether someone new will come along to help per-



Above: They always look over the hospital list before an evening prayer service.

petuate the group meetings.

"If we had a few swingers it'd be all right," Morris says.

"Thirty years ago," Buddy snaps, "they didn't think they'd last another day."

For now they keep coming, day after day, helping each other to make minyan.

"Who knows [why]." Dean says. "Habit probably."

Because "when you grow up that way it's not difficult."

Because "my father was one of the founders here."

"Because they needed me."

Because, as Maurice says, "I couldn't divorce myself of [it]. It's a part of me, you know." He pauses, then adds, "It's like the appendix. It's a vestigial remain, but it's a part of the whole, and I feel that without it, I'd be lost."

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