

Sam Israel Visits the Sephardic Bikur Holim Summer Camp

By Eugene Normand

This story occurred in either 1981 or 82. I was born in Brooklyn, New York into a typical Ashkenazic family and spent my first 22 years in Brooklyn. I graduated from the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn in 1964 with a BS in Chemical Engineering and was accepted into the nuclear engineering program at the University of Washington. In Seattle I met and married my wife Esther (nee Maimon) and after receiving my Ph.D., I held two unique jobs, on the NERVA nuclear rocket and in designing nuclear power plants in the Midwest.

In 1979 I was able to return to Seattle to work in my profession on the design of the Skagit nuclear power plant for the Puget Sound Power and Light Company. On returning to Seattle, I joined Sephardic Bikur Holim Congregation (SBH), the synagogue in which Esther had grown up, and was asked to be the head of the youth committee.

In 1981 or 82, the camp leadership had chosen a new location to hold its summer camp, namely the Sun Lakes State Park in eastern Washington. In previous years it had been at other camp sites that were much closer to Seattle. In that particular year, in June, the Seattle Times had run a several part series about a very unusual man from the Seattle Sephardic community named Sam Israel. Mr. Israel was a wealthy man, owning a sizable number of buildings in the downtown Seattle area and it stated that Mr. Israel usually lived in his home in Soap Lake in eastern Washington, which was relatively close to the Sun Lakes State Park where the SBH camp was going to be held.

Without knowing anything of the details of Mr. Israel and his previous involvement with the Seattle Sephardic community, I naively thought that it might be nice to inform Mr. Israel of the fact that the SBH camp was going to be located near his home that summer and so I wrote him a letter, inviting him to the camp for some Sephardic food. I never heard back from him, so I thought that that was the end of the story. I was wrong.

It seems that Mr. Israel received the letter, knew where the SBH camp was being held, and decided that it would be a nice gesture on his part to pay the camp a visit. He would bring his slide projector and show the campers his elaborate slide show about Israel. He had personally made several trips to Israel and had a full carousel of slides of the country which he liked to show to youth groups. He had done this with non-Jewish youth groups living in eastern Washington, so he knew that the show was well received young people.

Although he had grown up in Seattle, attending Cong. Ezra Bessaroth, he himself was not a religiously observant man. Thus, the day that he decided to visit our camp at Sun Lakes was Saturday, Shabbat. To observant Jews, there are lots of restrictions on what activities can and cannot be performed on Shabbat. Thus, when he showed up with his slide projector, I knew right away that was going to be a problem. However, the bigger problem was that the outer entrance to the camp had been locked and so it was very difficult for an outside person to gain entrance to the camp. This was probably done because it was Shabbat, the day of rest, and no visitors were expected on this day.

Although Mr. Israel had grown up in Seattle, attending Cong. Ezra Bessaroth, the synagogue of the Jews who originated on the island of Rhodes, he himself was not a religiously observant man. Thus, the day that he decided to visit our camp at Sun Lakes was Saturday, Shabbat. To observant Jews, there are lots of restrictions on what activities can and cannot be performed on Shabbat.

Thus, when Mr. Israel showed up with his slide projector, I knew right away that was going to be a problem. The first problem was that the outer entrance to the camp had been locked and so it was very difficult for an outside person to gain entrance to the camp. Thus, Mr. Israel had a problem, he knew that the camp was inside the Sun Lakes campground, but he couldn't get in since it was officially closed. Somehow, he was able to reach someone to let him in. Obviously, if he had contacted me ahead of time, that he wanted to come to see the campers and put on his slide show of Israel, we could have worked out a mutually agreed upon date and time, but he didn't. From what I gathered, Mr. Israel liked to do things one way, his way.

So, there he was, storming in, holding some of his slide projector material, and very upset because it had taken him so long to get in. I quickly realized that this

was really my responsibility, since I was the one who had written to him, and it was my letter that led him to visit us, unannounced and on his own schedule. I remember that I spent something like 20-30 minutes talking to him, trying to calm him down, but it wasn't easy. Part of his dress code was a 45 caliber pistol which he had in a holster. You don't ever see that on Shabbat, even in Israel, but we knew that Sam was very unique in how he conducted himself.

I also recall that Sam had not had a friendly relationship with Rabbi Maimon, the head of the camp, so once I realized that, I did all of the talking with Sam, a short distance removed from the entrance to the camp, trying to pacify him. I'm sure I offered him some *desayuno*, literally breakfast, but it is Sephardic dairy food always served for Shabbat lunch, which he would have enjoyed, and I didn't want him to be involved with Rabbi Maimon.

All these years later, I have no idea of what the conversation was about, except that I am sure that I told him the slide show would have been wonderful, the campers would have really enjoyed it, but the rules of Shabbat prevent us from viewing it on Shabbat. He obviously was not going to come back Saturday night, after Shabbat was over. It was a difficult situation that I had put myself in, so I knew that I had no one to blame but myself.

If Sam had called up, or tried to reach us at the campsite ahead of time, we could have worked out a way for our campers to have watched his slide show and we would have really been in his debt for this great opportunity given to the campers to see photos and slides of Israel. Today, 40 years late, when it is so commonplace for Jews to take their children on trips to Israel, we essentially take it for granted. However, then it was very uncommon for families to make such trips, and so a slide show on sites in Israel with personal comments on the pictures shown, would have been greatly appreciated by campers and staff. As I remember it, I had a difficult time trying to nap that Shabbat afternoon, the job of trying to calm down Sam Israel had gotten me worked up and exhausted, but I still vividly recall some of the details to this day.