

LOVE THE SINNER
By Samuel Greengus
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I always thought that Bradley Goldfaden was pretentious—not really the boy himself but his first name, Bradley. All the other boys in our class had ordinary names: Solly, Abie, Jake, Joe, Izzy, or Harry. The teacher most often called upon us using our last names or our Hebrew names; so that helped somewhat. Bradley's Hebrew name was Baruch; that wasn't at all pretentious; after all, the prophet Jeremiah had an amanuensis bearing that same name. So Baruch was a good name for a dutiful student. Maybe Bradley's parents could have translated Baruch, which means "blessed," into Benedict. Now that would have been okay. But had they named him Benedict, he never would have lived it down. The only Benedict we kids knew was Benedict Arnold; so just think how unmercifully we would have teased him if he had been called Benedict? At that time we were still too callow and untutored to know the name of Benedict Spinoza; he was a more honored figure in history; but Baruch or Benedict Spinoza would certainly not be revered by the rabbis who taught our classes. After all, didn't Spinoza end up being denounced as a heretic?

Our Baruch, that is, Bradley, also wanted to go his own way; maybe not exactly heresy; but even at this youthful stage, one could discern in Bradley the stirrings of discontent. Bradley was a reluctant scholar at best. He was intelligent to be sure; but Bradley had no great love for studying the sacred books of ancient rabbinical law and lore. He was in our school because his father insisted upon it. Mr. Goldfaden, to my eyes at that time, appeared as a successful business man. He was tall, well-groomed, and quiet. Mr. Goldfaden owned a large auto parts store; and when he came by, from time to time, to take Bradley home from school, I saw this man appearing in a dark, well-tailored suit and driving up in a new and shiny, dark sedan. Bradley's father appeared to me to be moving in a world that was remote from the worn black suits worn by the bearded rabbis who sat with us, poring over the great volumes of the Talmud in the Spartan classrooms of our school. Thinking back now, it may be that Mr. Goldfaden himself long ago in his youth had studied these same ancient texts with his rabbis. Maybe, like the German biologist and philosopher, Ernst Haeckel, Bradley's father believed that ontogeny *must* recapitulate phylogeny. Therefore, his son Bradley, like himself, needed to grow up through identical experiences and stages of development. Only through such measures, could the continuity of his species be successfully maintained. So Bradley had no choice; one day he might enter and maybe even inherit his father's auto parts business; but first he would

be required to tread the ancient path and to study like his father—and maybe even his grandfather-- had done.

Our classes were old fashioned and clearly modeled on the past. Students were seated at long tables forming a square around the teacher. Each student had in front of him a copy of the same volume of the Talmud open to the page being taught. The rabbi intoned the Hebrew and Aramaic text and explained its meaning in Yiddish. That year the class was studying the tractate of *Gittin*, which deals with the laws and regulations on divorce. For us boys—for the school was only for males-- the material was remote from our experience and observation. We were, it is true, experiencing the stirrings of puberty and adolescence and were becoming mindful of girls—our female contemporaries—and shyly even of beautiful adult women. So we may have thought of marriage as a far-off objective; but we certainly had little thought or knowledge of the adult pains of divorce. Still, in the order of tractates, the volume on divorce preceded the volume on matrimony. Why was this so? I really never learned the reason; but much later, I heard a worldly rabbi jest that “one must learn the cure before the affliction.”

Accordingly in our class, the teacher began reading from the text “When one brings and wishes to deliver a bill of divorce coming from a husband living in a province across the sea to a wife living in the land of Israel, that person bringing the divorce document must be able to swear that he was present when the divorce document was both signed and sealed. Otherwise it is not treated as credible.” Why is this so? To begin with, the Bible states that a legal transaction requires the presence of two qualified witnesses; and normally two witnesses would be present not only for the writing but also for the delivery of a bill of divorce. Because of the great physical distance between the parties, the rabbis were willing to accept the role of an agent of the husband serving as it were as the “hand of the husband” with the proviso that the agent must testify that the divorce document he carried from afar had been duly executed by the husband in the presence of the agent. Once the rabbis were satisfied that this was true, then the divorce document could be formally delivered to the wife— now before two proximate witnesses.

Now we being boys of limited experience it did not occur to us to ask why was the husband now divorcing his far-away wife? Did the husband find a new girl friend in the province across the sea? That might have been a consideration; otherwise, why didn't he divorce her before he left? But I and my young classmates did not ask such questions, especially since the Talmud gives a husband sweeping power to divorce his wife. A wife

had no power to refuse nor could she initiate a divorce on her own except in the most extreme circumstances such as impotence. (Now the rabbi glossed over this part quickly and did not pause to explain this nuance for we were still young boys who did not yet need to know about this feature.)

However, while the topic of divorce was mature, the concept of witnessing was not so remote even to adolescent boys. At the age of 13, a boy of sound mind and uncorrupted character could serve as a witness to religious transactions like marriage. Indeed my older brother was called upon to serve in this capacity a few times by my uncle who was a rabbi. Sometimes my uncle performed small weddings in the parlor of my grandmother's apartment for couples—usually older—who wanted a simple and basic wedding ceremony. I and my younger cousins were employed as acolytes, to hold up the plain portable wedding canopy over the heads of the bride and groom during the brief ceremony.

But I digress. Let us return to the classroom where Bradley, me, and the other boys were listening to the rabbi recite the lesson. After class, we were supposed to go to the large general study hall, where we would break up into small groups to go over what we had just learned in class. Our task was to try and master the text on our own so as to be ready to recite it back to the rabbi at the next class session. Older students were responsible for preparing the recitation before class; but we younger students could not yet do this. So we were charged with reviewing what had been taught. At the next class one or more of us might be called upon to recite the lesson back to our teacher, who could then refine or better explain parts of the discourse that were still unclear. The study hall was a less confined setting; we were required to spend the time there but, being boys, we might digress from the lesson to gossip about baseball, movies, and anything else that came to mind. To limit this kind of mental migration, the study hall was supervised by a monitor, Rabbi Mendel, who would walk around, listening to make sure that we were truly engaged in discussing the Talmud and not some secular trivialities. Rabbi Mendel was also supposed to be available to help us when we had difficulties in understanding the ancient texts we had studied and were now reviewing. But somehow whatever he told us would need to be corrected by our regular teacher when we returned on the next day to recite. So we developed some skepticism about the real depth of his learning and scholarship. Rabbi Mendel paid special attention to the younger students like us. From time to time he would look to see what page was open before us and to check if the pages of our volumes were sufficiently dog-eared. Woe to any boy, whose pages were pristine

and did not show signs from having been turned many times. Rabbi Mendel's suspicions would be roused by this clue; and he might then scold the boy and threaten to bring down the wrath of his teacher upon his head. Such urging could work upon committed students like me, but it had less effect upon Bradley, who would sit fidgeting but quiet, dreaming distant thoughts, and waiting for the study hall hour to be over. Because of Rabbi Mendel's role, we boys feared Rabbi Mendel and did not really look upon him kindly. But there were moments when we saw a twinkle in his eyes—a fleeting bond of understanding and sympathy from an adult, who perhaps had not totally forgotten his own childhood.

Bradley was truly unhappy. We could see it in his face and in the tense contortions of his body. But how could he break the bonds of coercion from Rabbi Mendel, his classroom rabbi, and the school? And, of course, there was his father, Mr. Goldfaden, who had made his wishes clear to the school. Mr. Goldfaden wanted Bradley to “soldier on” even if he was not ever going to become a scholar. Bradley finally came up with an ingenious plan of escape; he did not reveal it to the boys but, instead, carried it out on his own. It was Passover and at lunchtime in the great cafeteria every dish was strictly prepared according to the canons of rabbinic law and custom. Of course, all food served was strictly kosher and prepared by the matron of the kitchen; and it being Passover, matzo was served instead of bread. At first I did not understand what was happening. Bradley was sitting with a solitary piece of plain matzo on his plate. Then, from his school bag, he pulled out a tin can, opened it, spread its contents on his matzo, and—with a strange smile-- began quietly to eat. Bradley had left the can on the table and Rabbi Mendel, who was also in the cafeteria, walked by and, as was his custom, checked out the younger pupils. Rabbi Mendel was puzzled at first, but then became excited; Bradley had opened a can of smoked clams and was eating the non-kosher clams with his matzo! Oy, what a sacrilege had now been committed! Rabbi Mendel and another teacher hurriedly came over to Bradley, asked him to get up from his place and go with them into an adjoining room, while another teacher removed the desecrating dish from the table.

Well, you can just imagine what we thought was going to happen to Bradley. Bringing non-kosher food into the cafeteria of a religious academy and brazenly consuming it in this public fashion! A great sin indeed! Yet we heard no shouting coming from the room into which Bradley and Rabbi Mendel had entered. After some minutes, Bradley re-appeared to retrieve his school bag but then went back into the adjoining room and the door was quietly shut behind him. Rabbi Mendel later told us what transpired. Yes,

Bradley had committed a sin in public, but there was no earthly punishment to be meted out because, according to the Talmud, this was a case where a person committed a sin only to provoke the community and religious authorities by rejecting and flinging, as it were, their own doctrines back upon them. Rabbi Mendel explained to us boys that the ancient rabbis of the Talmud took it upon themselves to nullify such sins because the sinner, out of frustration or anger, had acted only to incite the community and the rabbinical authorities. This was not like other sins. Bradley did not serve himself the smoked clams for the illicit pleasure of eating them but, rather, out of his deep and desperate unhappiness and because the door of communication and expression with his father was not open as it should be. Therefore both the sin and its dubious pleasure would not to be acknowledged and was to be “erased” as it were from the great heavenly book of human reckoning. This revelation made me see Rabbi Mendel in a new light. He was not a relentless enforcer, as we boys liked to think of him; he showed us another side of himself that revealed that he indeed felt great empathy for the turmoil of youth and adolescence.

As for Bradley, he was not summarily expelled; but after some days not seeing him, we heard that his father had agreed to withdraw him from the school. Mr. Goldfaden, no doubt with persuasion from Rabbi Mendel and our teacher, had capitulated; he had come to terms with Bradley and the vicissitudes of his growing up. Bradley was sent to another, more secular school and our paths did not cross so often afterwards. I hoped that he had found a good place for himself. As for me and for the rest of the boys in the class, we had now learned and shared an important lesson about human behavior; that there are indeed times when one should hate the sin but we also sometimes needed to love and forgive the sinner.