

Reminiscences of Far Rockaway and the White Shul: 1951-1961

by

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At the 70th anniversary banquet of the White Shul, celebrated at the Sands in Atlantic Beach in 1992, Rabbi Pelcovitz was honored for “40 years of service to our congregation and community.” The hefty journal distributed at the banquet included a chronology that highlighted the key events in the history of the White Shul. Two entries, listed next to each other, deserve special attention:

1951 Rabbi Ralph Pelcovitz named as spiritual leader of Kneseth Israel.

1961 Land purchased on Sage and Empire for construction of new Synagogue.

Indeed, 1951-1961 was the first decade, and arguably the most important one, in the history of Rabbi Pelcovitz’s rabbinate in the White Shul. In 1951 the White Shul was not known nationally even among Orthodox Jews in the United States. By 1961, it was ranked among the most vibrant and significant Orthodox shuls in the world. To speak from the pulpit in the White Shul was an honor that no one could turn down; to make an appeal in the White Shul was an opportunity that virtually every Jewish organization sought. To address the White Shul was to address Orthodox Jewry. This remarkable transformation was largely due to the inspired leadership of Rabbi Pelcovitz. He, of course, could not do it alone. But it was Rabbi Pelcovitz who orchestrated the transformation. He had the vision and the wisdom that were essential for leading the White Shul to greatness.

Truthfully, only a professional historian could do justice to a history of Far Rockaway’s Jewish community in general, and to the history of the White Shul in particular. All I can contribute are some memories of what it

was like to live in Far Rockaway, and to *daven* in the White Shul, in that first decade of Rabbi Pelcovitz's tenure as rabbi of the White Shul.

1. Background. My memories of Far Rockaway begin in 1948, when my father was appointed principal of the Hebrew Institute of Long Island, popularly called HILI, an Orthodox day school (grades 1-8) with some 200 students at the time. It was the only Orthodox day school in all of Long Island, and it would play an important role in attracting young Jewish families to Far Rockaway and to the White Shul.

I still remember my first view of Far Rockaway in the Spring of 1948, when my father drove us (i.e. my Mom and brother as well) through the sites and streets of Far Rockaway. Sandy beaches, cool ocean breeze, golf course, trees, green lawns, flowers, beautiful homes, and more. All of 6 years old at the time, and bursting with excitement, I joyfully announced: "We are going to live in the country!" Indeed, for those moving to Far Rockaway from the Lower East Side, the Bronx, and (as in my case) from Brooklyn, Far Rockaway was a resort, "a Torah Suburb by the Sea," as it was famously labelled by Michael Kaufman in his essay on Far Rockaway published in 1960.

In 1950, Far Rockaway could boast of two well-established shuls, the White Shul at Dinsmore and Nameoke and Shaaray Tefila, almost around the corner, on Central Avenue. Throughout the years 1951-1961, there would be (for the most part) a friendly rivalry between the two shuls, each seeking to attract new members as new families settled in Far Rockaway. Not a few Jews took out membership in both shuls. It is all to the credit of their two distinguished rabbis, Rabbis Pelcovitz and Rackman, that they worked together to advance every cause that would enhance Jewish life in Far Rockaway. One of the great highlights of Jewish life in Far Rockaway (at least between 1951 and 1961, when I lived in Far Rockaway) took place every Simchas Torah, following the *hakofos*, when the two rabbis came together in the same room, were carried high on chairs by their ardent

enthusiasts, and the members of the rival shuls danced together in honor of the Torah and in honor of their rabbis.

2. Rabbi Pelcovitz as *Darshan*. Early in 1951, Rabbi Zelig Fortman died, having served the White Shul as its second rabbi from 1930 until his untimely death in his mid-fifties. I was too young (and ignorant) to appreciate his Yiddish sermons, but all who heard him recognized him as a master *darshan*. What I recall vividly is the *kavod ha-torah* that was rendered to him by the members of the White Shul. Every Shabbos morning, when the services ended, the *ba'ale-battim* didn't simply run down to the nearest *kiddush* or out the nearest exit to the street. All stood on a massive line and made their way to the podium in the front of the shul, where they greeted Rabbi Fortman, exchanged a word or two with him, and then left for the *kiddush* or home.

Until the appointment of Rabbi Pelcovitz later in 1951, I would ordinarily sit next to my father in the White Shul for much of the *davening*. At the time, there was neither a Youth program nor a Youth Minyan in the White Shul. But I was a youngster, with ants in my pants, and whenever possible, made my way either downstairs or outside the shul, where all the kids gathered, ran around, played games, and did whatever it is that kids do. For the most part, I disappeared during portions of *kerias ha-Torah* and during Rabbi Fortman's Yiddish sermon, both of which moved well beyond my attention span and, in any event, I often didn't understand a word of what was being said. That would change with the arrival of Rabbi Pelcovitz. Initially, I was just curious to hear what his sermons sounded like. It very quickly became apparent to me that I could follow at least parts of his *derashos*. Indeed, they were really interesting. The sermons were expertly crafted; there was a beginning, a middle, and an end. It all made sense. And he sprinkled his sermons with wonderful stories from the Talmud and Midrash, and with *bon mots* from all of literature. You always walked away with treasures after hearing Rabbi Pelcovitz speak. I agonized over my natural instinct to play outside the shul or to stay inside and listen to the sermon. I equivocated for a while, but ultimately Rabbi Pelcovitz won. What he had to say was far more important than anything I could possibly learn running around with my friends outside the shul.

3. Ba'ale-Battim in the White Shul. The White Shul has always been blessed with a cadre of *ba'ale-battim* whose commitment to Orthodoxy was uncompromising. Among the old-timers who were present in the White Shul when we arrived in 1948 were Carl Austern (always described to me as one of the founding fathers of the White Shul); Daniel Meyers (a Torah activist who was an ardent supporter of Mesivta Torah Vodaas, and who led the campaign for Far Rockaway's first *mikvah* in the 1950's – the previously used *mikvah* was in Edgemere); Al Goldman (the *ba'al tokea* of the White Shul); and Rabbi Sam Genauer, one of the many ordained rabbis (without a pulpit) and major *talmidei chachomim* who served as *ba'ale-battim* in the White Shul. By the end of the first decade of Rabbi Pelcovitz's incumbency, there were as many as 35 ordained rabbis who served as *ba'ale-battim* in the White Shul.

It was these *ba'ale-battim*, and many more whose names cannot be listed in this brief account, who in 1951 appointed Sol Septimus as head of the search committee to select a new rabbi for the White Shul. There were many applicants for the post. Ultimately, a short list was settled upon, and I still remember the candidates who came on *probe*. And that committee had the wisdom to select Rabbi Pelcovitz as the third rabbi of the White Shul. The rest, as they say, is history.

Rabbi Pelcovitz was a master at getting everybody involved in the shul. He always taught that everyone had a share in Torah, and he made certain that everyone had a share in good deeds. A shul was not merely a room where people convened to *daven* and learn; it was a community, a *kehillah*, where everyone, men and women, had what to contribute. And so, for example, Isidor Zwiebel was a *gabbai*. He almost kept me from attending my own Bar-Mitzvah in 1954. I was all of 4' 5" at the time and looked much like a 7 year old. As I entered the shul, he stopped me at the door and said, "Sonny, there is no running around in the shul this Shabbos; there is a big Bar-Mitzvah today." With a proud smile I explained to him that I was the Bar-Mitzvah boy.

Jerry Rubenstein, for example, was in charge of the shul kitchen, and set up the *kiddushim* and *shalosh-se'udos*. What I never knew until recently is that, apparently, he played a significant role in what ultimately

led to the appointment of Rabbi Pelcovitz in the White Shul. According to a newspaper account published in *Yated Ne'eman* in 2016, the following occurred:

“When the Rubenstein family moved to Far Rockaway, they joined the White Shul, a shul committed to Torah ideals led by Rabbi Fortman. Two years later, in 1951, when the *Rov* passed away, the town was slowly drifting away from Torah and *mitzvos*...The *shul* was at a crossroads. One of the richest members of the community was not religious and was pushing strongly for his modernization agenda. Jerry Rubenstein got up at a shul meeting and put the ringleader in his place. ‘This is our shul and we have worked to preserve it as a place of Torah-true *yiddishkeit*. That is the way it must remain.’ With that, he motioned for the ringleader to be thrown out, so that he could be stopped from sabotaging the shul’s spiritual growth. The people were moved by this plea and ended up voting to hire Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz as their spiritual leader. Rabbi Pelcovitz’s influence had a profound impact on the spiritual growth of the community.”

Under the rubric *ba’ale-battim*, one can include here a brief discussion of the cantors who graced the White Shul with their presence, for ultimately they were replaced by the *ba’ale-battim* themselves. Rabbi Pelcovitz inherited the old Chazzan Moskowitz, who for many years had led the services in the White Shul. It was wisely decided to allow him to retire gradually over a period of time. His cantorial efforts were now confined mostly to reciting *pesukei de-zimra* on Shabbos morning. Several very able cantors were hired over a period of years, include Cantor Handel and Cantor Oscar Berry, who led the *shacharis* and *musaf* services every Shabbos. But ultimately, as the shul kept growing larger and larger during Rabbi Pelcovitz’s first decade, it became obvious that the shul was blessed with excellent *ba’alei tefillah*. A vote was taken, and the six or so best were selected, and they were given exclusive rights to lead the Shabbos services in rotation. If you were making a *simchah* in shul (e.g, a Bar-Mitzvah or an *aufruf*), you could select any one of the six, even if he wasn’t scheduled for that particular Shabbos. For the connoisseurs who insisted

on hearing the best cantors in the world, the White Shul would every once in a while sponsor a concert by a world-class Chazzan. In the 1950's, Chazzan Sholom Katz officiated for a Shabbos in the old White Shul. It was my first exposure to a world-class Chazzan. (I recall too that shortly before his death, perhaps in 1965 or 1966, Chazzan Moshe Kousevitzky officiated for a Shabbos in the new White Shul. I was a student at the University of Pennsylvania at the time, but made sure to make my way to the White Shul for that occasion. It was a Shabbos to remember.)

One cannot possibly remember the first decade of Rabbi Pelcovitz's tenure in the White Shul without mentioning perhaps the most important *ba'al ha-bayis* in the White Shul at the time, Reb Pinchas Osowsky (pronounced: Osofsky). He was officially the sexton, with numerous responsibilities. But he will be remembered by all mostly for his *laining* which was immaculate. I doubt that I have ever heard a better *ba'al keriah* in my life. And there is a moral lesson here as well. In his first years at the White Shul, he often erred in his reading of the Torah. The listeners were quick to correct him. It was an embarrassment, for he was hired precisely in order to *lain* regularly and perfectly. He took the criticism to heart, applied himself to the task, and became one of the all time great *ba'alei keriah*.

4. Rabbi Pelcovitz's Disciples. Rabbi Pelcovitz devoted great effort in his first decade at the White Shul to providing youngsters with a meaningful experience in shul. Under his aegis, youth programs were introduced, where youngsters could learn how to *daven* at their own pace, and how to participate in, and lead their own services. He established a Youth Minyan (downstairs in the *Beis Medrash* of the old White Shul), and provided it with mentors who taught the youngsters how to *daven* properly. Needless to say, everything was done *ke-halakhah*. Twice a year there would be a Youth Shabbos upstairs in the main sanctuary; the youngsters would take over the entire *davening*, including the Rabbi's sermon! Not only did we learn how to *daven* properly; we learned how to overcome stage fright as well. The ultimate proof of the success of the program can be seen in the postcard reproduced here (see p. 10). It was sent in a general mailing to the entire White Shul membership, announcing that Shabbos Parshas Yisro, February 11-12, 1955, would be a Youth Shabbos upstairs in the

main sanctuary. It listed the various youngsters who would participate in the program, and their specific roles. These are among the first disciples of Rabbi Pelcovitz and the White Shul, who would go on to become the rabbis and the *ba'ale-battim* of the future. Alas, I'm no longer in touch with some of them, but I will list the names and professions of the ones I know (or: knew) best.

George Samet is Rabbi Yehuda Samet. He and his wife Yehudis went on Aliyah in 1967. He is a master teacher who has devoted his life to teaching Torah to *ba'alei-teshuvah*, or more precisely, to Jews who never learned much about Judaism. He teaches at Yeshivat Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem.

Lawrence Kaplan, well known author and lecturer, is Professor of Rabbinics and Jewish Philosophy at McGill University in Montreal. Among his recent publications is *Maimonides Between Philosophy and Halakhah: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's Lectures on the Guide for the Perplexed at the Bernard Revel Graduate School* (Ktav Publishing: New York, 2016).

Sheldon Rubenstein (son of Jerry Rubenstein, mentioned earlier) became Rabbi Asher Zelig Rubenstein, ה"ע (d. 2013). He served as Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Toras Simcha in Jerusalem, and authored a variety of rabbinic works in Hebrew and in English. His most recent work, published posthumously and edited by Rabbi Yosef Tropper, is entitled *Wings of Faith* (Jerusalem, 2017).

Charles Septimus is Rabbi Chaim Septimus, a distinguished Jewish educator who has taught thousands of students, mostly young women who spend a year or two of intensive Torah study in Jerusalem after graduating from high school. He lives with his wife in Jerusalem. His younger brother Barry, also listed on the postcard, lives in the Five Towns and needs no introduction to a White Shul audience.

Howard Joseph, distinguished rabbi and scholar, is an Ashkenazi raised in Far Rockaway, who serves as Rabbi Emeritus of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in Montreal.

Bernard Septimus (son of Sol Septimus, mentioned earlier), distinguished *talmid chacham* and scholar, is Jacob Safra Professor of Jewish History and Sephardic Culture at Harvard University. (I believe that he is presently Professor Emeritus.)

In closing, I'll mention one more sample of Rabbi Pelcovitz's profound impact on the youngsters who made up the first graduating class of his efforts in the White Shul from 1951-1961. Perchance, I noticed an interview that was recorded in 2007 and was posted on the Internet. Alan G. Ciner was interviewed by Peggy Kaplan for the Columbus [Ohio] Jewish Historical Society's Oral History Project. Alan Ciner, born and raised in Far Rockaway, earned his *smicha* from the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University. He also earned a Master's degree in medieval Jewish philosophy at Yeshiva University. He has served in the rabbinate in Baltimore, Columbus, and Palm Beach, and is currently Vice President of the Touro College and University System, and serves as CEO of Touro College South. Alan's father, William Ciner, was a former president of the White Shul. Alan's older brother Sammy was my best friend (and in 1948, when the Leiman family moved to Far Rockaway and settled in the Reads Lane area, I regularly walked a mile to the Ciner home on Greenport Road in order to find a shomer shabbos boy, Sammy, to play with.)

At one point in the fascinating interview, Rabbi Ciner was asked, "Who had the greatest influence on you while you were young?" He answered unhesitatingly, "My Mother and Father." He then added, "I want to add also my rabbi who still lives, Rabbi Ralph Pelcovitz. I don't know if he's aware of the influence he had, [which was] profound. I value that I was exposed to such a *talmid chacham*, to such a good person, to whom values and *musar*, and whether you are a good person as well as a [good] Jew, and [possess] *yirat shamayim*, are the important things. And I was not one of those kids who was playing outside during the rabbi's sermon. My father insisted [that] I sit in the shul."

Look at the first fruits of Rabbi Pelcovitz's, and the White Shul's, labor of love!

יהא זכרו ברוך!

Afterword: This brief essay focuses on a few themes, and on a brief period, in the long history of the White Shul. I could not mention endless names and anecdotes that came to mind, and I deliberately kept references to my own family at a minimum. But I would be remiss if I did not mention my dear Aunt and Uncle, Jean and Bernie Gross, who left an indelible imprint on the White Shul and on the Far Rockaway Jewish community in the very period treated by this essay. And I would be remiss if I did not mention my favorite Aunt, Shirley, who in a later period enabled Rabbi Pelcovitz to engage in so many more wonderful years of learning and teaching and growing. He was always learning, always teaching, and always growing. We owe her a debt of gratitude that only G-d can repay.

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