

# A Long Way from Yokosuka

BY MIKE RANKIN

**I**n 1964, I was a Navy medical officer assigned to a ship off the coast of South Vietnam. My best friend on board was a Navy officer from south Georgia. Originally home-ported in Newport, Rhode Island, the ship was filled with New Englanders. Tom and I were the only two officers from small southern towns. Different as we were, Tom, a non-practicing Methodist, and I, a Jewish lay leader of a congregation of six enlisted men, shared a love of college football and music (Bo Diddley, Fats Domino, and Mozart).

Tom liked to stand his bridge watches from midnight to 4:00 a.m., the mid-watch. Often I joined him, sharing bad coffee and good conversation. The Navy prohibits three topics at meals: politics, sex, and religion. On the bridge we discussed them all.

Tom had not been to church since he graduated from the Naval Academy. Partly out of curiosity, and partly to be supportive, he came to a much abbreviated Yom Kippur service I led aboard the ship. Afterwards he asked probing questions about Judaism. I'd had little formal Jewish education, so my answers were rather superficial and incomplete. He wanted more. He wanted books to read. I gave him Rabbi Milton Steinberg's *Anatomy of Faith* and *Basic Judaism*, Rabbi Morris Kertzer's *What Is a Jew?*, Martin Buber's *Two Types of Faith*, and Rabbi Leo Baeck's *Judaism and Christianity*. Above all he treasured the Baeck.

We went to services when we could: to Ohel Leah Synagogue in Hong Kong, to Temple Emanu-El in Honolulu—and to a lay-led seder on the Navy Base in Yokosuka, Japan for about 100 people, 75 of them U.S. Navy men and women and the remainder their Japanese families or friends. At a signal from the Navy doctor leading the seder, a 5-year-old boy, the son of a Navy officer and a Japanese Naval architect, walked to the head table, bowed, adjusted his falling *kipah*, and announced: "I am David Hiroshi Cohen. I will now chant the Four Questions." Closing his eyes, he intoned: *Manishtana halaila hazeh, mikol haleilot...* with all his heart and soul. When he finished, he bowed, retrieved his now fallen *kipah*, and translated the Hebrew, first into Japanese for his grandparents attending their first seder, then into English for the rest of us. With a huge grin, he accepted his applause, and waited patiently at the front, hoping to be asked for an encore. Finally his proud mother took him by the hand and led him back to his seat.

"Is Passover always this much fun?" Tom whispered to me.

"Oh yes!" I replied.

Back on the ship, we took our coffee to the fantail to talk. It was dark; the lights in the harbor shone in the distance.

"I thought I wanted to become a Jew," he began, "but I wasn't sure. Now I am. Watching that kid and his parents—the

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look on their faces—I knew. There's no more doubt. I want to be a part of that. I want to study with a rabbi."

Perhaps it was *besheret* (destiny): the rabbi of Temple Israel in Long Beach, our ship's new home port, turned out to be Rabbi Wolli Kaelter, who had been Rabbi Baeck's student in Germany. He agreed to teach Tom by exchange of letters and books until we could return to California.

Ever the overachiever, Tom wanted not only to convert, but to become a bar mitzvah. He did both at Temple Israel. "I stood with



*Tom (on the left) and me drinking an onboard "L'Chaim."*

the Jewish people at Sinai," he wrote, and "I stand with them for all time. I, too, knew the searing pain of Auschwitz and the soaring exhilaration of the founding of the State of Israel, an eternal refuge for our people fleeing oppression and spiritual annihilation."

My Navy buddy had accepted a life of Torah.

**I**n time Tom and I both left the Navy. He went to law school; married Ann, a fellow student; and began a practice in his hometown. At Ann's parents' congregation in Atlanta, they found a Jewish community, and in time their sons and daughter became b'nai mitzvah too.

When I retired and had time to travel, Tom asked me to spend Passover with his family, and to lead the seder. Challenged by health problems, Ann's parents wanted to move the celebration to Tom and Ann's, and neither Tom nor Ann was quite comfortable conducting the seder.

"How many people are coming?" I asked.

"Twenty," Tom replied, "including two Roman Catholics and a dozen Southern Baptists. Few have ever been to a seder. Most think it's a Hebrew version of their communion service, plus dinner. One asked if I was barbecuing, and if he could contribute the beer."

"Sure," I said, smiling. "My pleasure."

**T**he seder was wonderful. It wasn't hard to make real the Passover message of justice and freedom. Ann's parents' Atlanta synagogue had been bombed in 1958, at the beginning of the struggle for African American civil rights. Her grandmother had told her how frightened Georgia's Jews were in 1914 when Leo Frank was lynched in a nearby town. The fathers of some of the seder guests had been members of the White Citizens Councils, and some had grandfathers in the Klan.

We spoke of these things, but the seder wasn't all seriousness and gloom. Picture a dozen Southern Baptists singing "Dayenu" with all their hearts and souls—you had to be there!

At my seders, I invite the longest married or partnered couple, or the newest in love, to read to each other from *Shir Shir-*