



Al Jaffee's Jewish Journey

How a positive childhood experience influenced thousands.

Lithuania to America, and Back Again

The legendary cartoonist, Al Jaffee, who worked for seven decades at MAD magazine, passed away this week at the age of 102. He retired at the impressive age of 99, earning a place in the Guinness Book of World Records as the cartoonist with the longest career. While his Jewish identity was widely known, his background was less so.

He was born in 1921 in Savannah, Georgia to a Jewish couple who had emigrated from Lithuania. When he was six years old, his mother discovered that the non-Jewish housekeeper had cooked non-kosher food in their kitchen. Horrified, she decided to return with her family to their hometown of Zarasai, Lithuania. Her husband objected, but to no avail, as she took their four children and left for Europe without him.

Zarasa is a city surrounded by numerous lakes and rivers, and Al Jaffee remembers those times as a carefree period in which he was free to run and explore nature.

In Lithuania, he studied at a cheder where he discovered his passion for art and painting; he built an ark out of wood and small animals around it when he learned the story of Noah's Ark from his teacher. He and his brother made a pair of candlesticks out of wood for their mother, along with a Kiddush cup. For the holiday of Simchas Torah, they would prepare wooden lanterns for candles, and all year round, they would plan their decorations for it. When they walked around the

bimah with their lanterns on Simchas Torah, there was nobody happier.

After living in Lithuania for a little over a year, Al's father arrived to take his family back to the United States. Just a year after their return, in 1929, Al's mother took them back to Europe. Then, when Hitler rose to power in Germany in 1933, Al's father managed to bring three of the children back to the United States, where they settled in New York for good. However, Al's very religious mother could not bring herself to return to "godless America." (He remembers waking up on Saturday mornings and finding that his mother had left them at home and walked many kilometers to the synagogue, returning late in the evening). In 1940, Al's father managed to rescue his fourth son, but his mother, who had finally made plans to return to the United States, became trapped in Europe and perished in the Holocaust.

In New York, his father worked very hard to support his family, while Al Jaffee himself served in the US Army and later began working as a magazine illustrator. In 1955, he started working at MAD magazine, which was at the forefront of the new industry of comic books, which was dominated by Jewish creators. His Jewish and Yiddish background proved to be a great asset in this field, and he continued to excel in it for over 70 years!

However, there is another side to his career that is less well known. In the 1980s, the Rebbe founded the youth movement "Tzivos Hashem" and they decided to publish a newspaper for children. They were looking for a top-notch illustrator and found Al Jaffee. In this magazine, his Jewish background from Cheder came in handy. When they asked him to illustrate a Jewish topic, they did not need to explain to him what and how to do it. He knew exactly what to do. It came from deep in his soul. He remained a part of Moshiah Times for the rest of his life.

The magazine, with his illustrations, would always be submitted to the Rebbe before printing. The Rebbe always made sure that each front cover should also include a girl. Additionally, the Rebbe requested that caricatures not depict people with strange features, such as long noses or oversized bodies. The Rebbe believed this to be a “huge educational mistake”; perhaps he did not want children to mock others based on their appearance, and wanted to teach sensitivity towards children with disabilities.

The Foundations

During that same period, the Rebbe also instituted a new system for studying Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah, a comprehensive code of Jewish law consisting of fourteen volumes.

Unlike other books of Jewish law that focus only on the laws relevant to contemporary times, Mishneh Torah covers all aspects of Jewish law, including those that relate to the times of the Holy Temple. For example, the Shulchan Aruch, a widely used code of Jewish law, does not include laws related to the Holy Temple and the sacrificial offerings. On the other hand, Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah covers all the laws of the entire Torah. The Rebbe therefore established a system whereby every individual should study a portion of Mishneh Torah every day, thus covering the entire range of Jewish law.

The Rebbe established three study tracks; the first option is to study three chapters per day and complete the entire “Mishneh Torah” in one year, the second option is to study one chapter per day and complete the book in three years, and the third option is to study the Rambam’s “Sefer HaMitzvot,” which lists all 613 commandments written in the Torah.

This Shabbat, Rosh Chodesh Iyar, thousands of Jews around the world will complete the study cycle in all three versions, and the next day they will begin the book again from the beginning.

The Rambam begins his book with the words, “The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of all wisdoms is to know that there is a First Being and He brought into existence all existence.” The Rambam starts by stating that the foundation and beginning of all knowledge is to recognize that G-d created the world.

The Rebbe asks: The two terms “foundation” and “pillar” seem to be opposites. A foundation is hidden in the ground, whereas a pillar is widely visible. Why are they listed together?

It is because they teach us an important lesson:

In the spiritual life of a Jew, there is the “foundation” of knowing that there is a “first existence” and that G-d created the world and governs it, i.e., a feeling and belief within him which is not visible to others just like a foundation is underground. Then there is the “pillar,” the visible elements, which emerge from his faith — his actual observance of Torah and mitzvos. (Toras Menachem 5732, volume 2, page 16). To erect a successful pillar, you first need to build a strong foundation.

This idea found its expression in the work of Al Jaffee. He gained his “foundation” in Cheder, in Lithuania, where he not only discovered his artistic talent but also received his Jewish “foundation.” It was deep within him for many years, but when Chabad approached him and asked him to illustrate the “Moshiach Times,” this foundation was awakened and the “pillar” became visible to all who saw and read it.

The idea holds true for each and every one of us. As parents, we must remember that education is the foundation upon which we build our children’s lives. Researchers say, that from birth to age seven, a child is primarily influenced by their parents, and from age seven until the age of Bar Mitzvah, they remain under their parents’ influence, though to a lesser degree. By the time they reach adulthood, parents only have a six percent influence, and it decreases as their child grows older. It’s essential that we invest in our foundation, in Jewish

education at a very young age. It is only through strong foundations that we will erect pillars that illuminate the world.