

## Year One in Movement Leadership

By Larry Kleinman

Though I was first drawn to the movement in April 1968, right after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., I came to movement leadership when I was selected by my peers as co-chair of the Solel Youth Group Social Action Committee in September 1969. I had just turned sixteen and begun my junior year at Highland Park High School.

By that time, I had a pretty good idea of just how unusual Congregation Solel was among the dozens of Chicago-area temples and the countless others in the broader Jewish world. I had returned in late August from a seven-week sojourn in Israel, my reward for finishing seven years of twice-weekly Hebrew classes at Solel. What set Solel apart was what they *didn't* offer: the traditional Hebrew school preparation for one's Bar/Bat-Mitzvah. The Solel founders had grown disgusted with that custom. In their view, it had become irrevocably corrupted by evermore garish and self-indulgent parties—a troubling bi-product of Jewish upward economic mobility in the 1950s and 1960s.

Just as Solel's leaders intended, the years of conversational Hebrew instruction equipped me to connect with Israelis at the agricultural school where we resided and worked, and with folks we encountered on the streets of nearby Haifa and on side-trips which included parts of the just-captured West Bank territory. Much to the surprise and consternation of Solel elders, though, I came back raising questions about mistreatment of Palestinians and North African Jews and voicing pointed skepticism about the "law of return." As near as I could understand it, the law instantly granted to me as a Jew the citizenship rights routinely denied to the Arab people who had resided there for generations—perhaps centuries.

Four weeks after returning from Israel, I took up my nine-month tenure as Social Action Co-chair. The Committee's work reflected the activism of the times. I led the organizing to set up and sustain the weekly tutoring program serving mostly Appalachian youth in the Uptown neighborhood on Chicago's North Side. The grade-schoolers we tutored quickly got accustomed to using the odd-sized orange paper we brought each week—X-ray film sheathing which I scavenged by the box full from a lab at Highland Park Hospital. We imagined that the teachers in Uptown schools grew tired of the students' quip "orange you glad I did my assignment," but the paper left little doubt about where the homework got done. The Youth Group had previously ventured into after-school tutoring in an African-American neighborhood on Chicago's South Side, an initiative that ended just as I joined. Though never explicit, the shift to a white neighborhood and the rise of Black-nationalist sentiment didn't seem coincidental.

That winter, I organized an event at Solel headlined by comedian and activist Dick Gregory—one of my father's tax clients who became a family friend. The program also featured Yippie leaders Abby Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, who were pinned down in the

Chicago-area for months standing trial in federal court. They were two of the “Chicago Eight” defendants charged with conspiracy to incite the “riots” outside the Democratic Party’s August 1968 convention. The Solel event attracted hundreds, including, uncharacteristically, some Youth Group leaders’ parents. They cringed—as we cheered—when Jerry lived up to his reputation for clowning by reprising his “tipping of the wig” and revealed his clean-shaven head. It was stunt he had debuted in the courtroom, one of many that earned him contempt of court citations by Judge Julius Hoffman.

I co-led the Highland Park High School walk-out on May 7, 1970 to protest the Vietnam War and the National Guard killings at Kent State and Jackson State on May 4<sup>th</sup> of students protesting the U.S. invasion of Cambodia. The Solel Youth Group leaders figured prominently in the ad hoc organizing committee. Ellen Ettlinger—another Solelite—and I worked all night—and probably shortened our life expectancies—breathing ink fumes as we mimeographed 5,000 flyers. The Temple office secretary probably figured that a case of blue paper was missing because she’d forgotten to order it. On May 7<sup>th</sup>, about half of the High School’s 2,500 students poured out of the main entrance and on to Vine Street for a march and rally at Sunset Park. The only non-law-enforcement adult I remember in our midst was a conservatively-dressed man in his fifties who later addressed the crowd on behalf of Businessmen Against the War.

Just days later, Youth Group leaders spent an entire weekend—day and night—at Solel, organizing and taking part in Yom H’Shoah (Holocaust Day) observances. We watched the graphic French documentary, Night and Fog, multiple times, striving to burn into our minds the cathartic images behind the mantra “*never again!*” Casting about for ways to visually display the Holocaust’s scale, I seized on...grass seed. (Maybe I was channeling five years of lawn mowing.) The mound of seed I placed on a cardboard sheet got visitors’ attention. They shifted their gaze to and from the pile and a small circle outlined in marker which contained exactly one hundred seeds. An adjacent explanation described the extrapolations used to measure out six million seeds.

In the fall of 1970, Solel Youth Group experienced an exodus of leadership. I was among a half dozen leaders positioned to become chair, but none of us stepped forward. The anti-war movement had lost steam nationally. Turn-out at protests dropped sharply, a direct result, I later concluded, of Nixon’s brilliant political maneuver to institute a draft lottery on December 1, 1969. On that one night, millions of young men learned that they would escape obligatory military service because the number drawn, corresponding to their date of birth, was a “high” one—likely or certainly above the cut-off point for those to be called in the following year. Those young men—and their girlfriends, parents, and siblings—knew instantly that they were no longer in harm’s way, diminishing their personal incentive to end the War.

The anti-war movement—and perhaps protesting in general—was somehow no longer “cool.” We had relied on the movement wave to carry us and we suddenly felt socially stranded. The malaise was palpable but no one called it out. We each seemed to intuit that the energy—the *flash*—had faded. We could see and feel our ranks thinning. No one relished leading a shrunken following.

That fall, the last of my high school years, my leadership stalled, but my service in the movement did not. In February 1970, I had enrolled in the draft counseling training offered by the Quakers through the Midwest branch of the Central Committee for Conscientious Objection. That summer I started volunteering weekly at the one-room counseling center housed at Emanuel Congregation on Chicago’s North Side. In September 1970, I co-founded the North Shore Draft Counseling Center. Decidedly home-made posters, placed along the high school hallways, announced the Center’s purpose, location—Temple Solel—and hours. But with high school seniors less anxious about the waning draft threat, the Center attracted only a trickle of clients. For them, we diligently provided general information about draft registration, and we counseled the handful who wrestled with an daunting challenge: how does a Jew—universally expected to unreservedly take up arms to defend the young State of Israel—credibly claim to oppose *all* wars, as required to apply for conscientious objector status?

The kinds of thrills and disappointments that filled that first year have recurred in countless forms as I took on leadership roles in existing progressive organizations, like the National Lawyers Guild and Social Justice Fund Northwest, and as I co-founded new ones in Oregon, principally the Willamette Valley Immigration Project, Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN), the Progressive Jewish Gathering, and the Northwest Worker Justice Project. In the late 1970s, the Immigration Project immersed me in the Willamette Valley’s Mexican community and its skirmishes with *La Migra*—the Immigration and Naturalization Service. The Project organized and provided legal defense to immigrants caught in INS raids and assist the few immigrants who qualified to seek permanent legal status. In 1985, the Project birthed PCUN, Oregon’s farmworker union, and I became an organizational *mil usos* (a “thousand uses” or more loosely, a “Jack of all trades”) during PCUN’s first quarter century.

What lasting imprint did co-chairing the Congregation Solel Youth Group Social Action Committee leave? Our work that year turned out to be what would become, for me a familiar kind of mix: service, study, street action, and show time. We felt the exhilaration of mass action, the bewilderment and emptiness of incomprehensible oppression, and the dismay of flagging momentum. I practiced un-self-consciousness in the presence of luminaries. I broke with conventions about my place and politics as a Jew. I put my convictions and passions into action. I negotiated and I hustled. I organized. I tried to fathom the tension between ego and mission.

In May 2006, leaders of LUCHA, a Latino student group at Woodburn High School, asked me to speak at their meeting. Weeks earlier, they had led hundreds in a walk-out to protest the Sensenbrenner Bill and its proposed criminalization of anyone who aids an undocumented immigrant. Nationwide, four million people had marched and rallied that May Day, including 12,000 at Oregon's State Capitol building in Salem.

Before speaking on the LUCHA meeting topic, "what comes next?," I told a brief story: "Being here brings to mind a young person who helped organize a school walk-out to protest an injustice of nationwide proportions, and who asked himself 'can I say "no" to military service and am I prepared to risk jail for what I believe?' " I continued: "Some of you know me only as a PCUN leader, but I was that young person." I proceeded to briefly describe what I had done and experienced thirty-six years earlier. The three dozen immigrant youth listened intently; some seemed startled, perhaps because they couldn't picture me as a seventeen-year-old. I concluded my remarks with a statement I find myself expressing more frequently as I enter my fifth decade in the movement: "For me, it's always special privilege to talk with groups like LUCHA because I, too, became an activist at an early age."