

## How One Determined Outsider Fell Under Camp Achva's Spell and Stayed There: A Tribute to the Founding Mothers

I can't remember what I ate for breakfast yesterday, but what I did at Achva more than 30 years ago is freakishly clear.

I was not an early adopter. Big brother Charlie decided to join the ranks in 1973, just after his bar mitzvah. I thought he'd lost his mind. Schedules...in summer? Organized activities...in summer? Carpools, for gad's sake, in summer? No, no, no. Summer was about the opposite of all that.

But I deigned to attend with the rest of my family the show put on by Achva campers at the end of that season. And there I was converted. I had gone expecting to be a little amused and a little embarrassed by a display of goofiness and geekiness, but something altogether unexpected happened. It was certainly not the first time I'd seen kids performing. But here. These kids. Some older than I, some younger. What they were singing and dancing. How they were singing and dancing. (Look! Now they're Hebrew letters, and they're twirling while they sing!) At the time I had no way to identify why it was so transporting; I was just transported, watching it all, my mouth slightly open. The Olam Tikvah sanctuary had become a beehive of kicky, funny, smart expression, and I knew I wanted to be a part of whatever was the source of all that.

Lucky me, I did not have to wait a whole calendar year. Deb Botuck (one of the first Achvaniks, I do believe) and I had become good friends through public school. Deb would now become my go-to person for all things Achva. I had her teach me every Shirley Grossman song as well as every bloody song she ever sang at an Achva *shira*. (Wait, Deb. What is it again? Ah. OK. Got it: *Al-cho-mo-tay-ich-ir-David*....) It was a pre-season training regimen of my own creation—I guess I wanted to hit the ground running come my actual arrival at Achva—and Deb Botuck was the best coach ever.

There was more that pre-season. Both Deb Botuck and Charlie Brissman were part of the Achva group that Shirley Waxman was going to take to the Israel Folk Dance Festival in March of 1974. I somehow insinuated myself into the carpool for those dance-festival rehearsals. Once at the rehearsals, I sat on the floor in a corner and, eyes like laser beams, committed every move to memory. Step. Brush. Hop-step-down. At some point, dear Deb walked me up to Shirley, introduced me as Charlie Brissman's sister, said I wasn't an Achvanik, not yet, but I knew every step of the dance.... I was trying to look eager but composed. Fact is, I was intimidated. I had studied Shirley's grace and power (and those beautiful calves!) from a distance. Now I was next to her. She was certainly not tall, yet I remember feeling that I was standing in the shadow of a giant. Shirley took a look at me. She emitted neither squeals of joy nor shouts of protest. There was, I believe, just a matter-of-fact "OK." And when I joined Deb's line, crossed my arms palms-out and locked hands with *my fellow dancers*, actually got to move to the primal, driving *Yehoshuah*, I had arrived.

Shirley Waxman. It was one thing to bring all those amazing dances to kids who had an affinity for the activity. What I marvel at now is how, thanks to Shirley, kids who never otherwise would have gotten up and moved their bodies to music, kids who didn't know their Yemenite right from their Yemenite left, discovered that they loved to dance. She brought music and choreography to appeal to every taste. She never condescended. She never made you feel that you were not doing it right—not even Michael Hausfeld, who never once delivered a step on its beat. Shirley taught not just dance but that dance is for everyone. Think of how many parents must have been struck dumb to see their ungainly, unruly kids gleefully *Hora Oring*, *Naomiing*, *Haroa Haktanaing*, and grape-stomping all over the DC metropolitan area.

Judy Frank. Judy was a great upholder of the Achva model while simultaneously subverting it. The baby of the founders group, Judy just could not help making mischief. When the camp theme was geographical groupings of Jews (Falashas, Maranos, etc.), LTP2 was Refuseniks and LTP1 was South of the Border. It was under Judy's counselorship that we LTP2ers composed a group song featuring this stanza:

There's LTP both 1 and 2  
I leave it up to you  
Would you rather be with them or me  
Refuseniks or an S-O-B

A classic of Judy's mischief-making involved the Israeli music counselor and heartthrob, Moshe (who succeeded the Israeli music counselor and heartthrob, Amnon). Moshe had a rather obvious crush—

innocent, to be sure—on Judy’s camper Susan Sacarob. Somehow, Judy corralled Ellen Gallant and me, who were also her campers, to join her in a performance, unannounced, at some camp gathering—I am certain the gathering did not include parents. The number was based on a song that Moshe had taught the camp that year, which began:

*U’Moshe hika al tsur  
Bamate hika al sela (sela)*

In our rendition, Judy, Ellen, and I were each clad in a raincoat under which we concealed a loaded water gun. Our song began:

U’Moshe he loved the girls  
But at Achva they were too young (too young)

As our song continued, we brandished our guns and squirted the audience with water on the word “uzi”:

“I love you,” he called to Susie  
She replied, “Show me your uzi” (uzi)  
Moshe’s dying to have a date with Susie  
What a thing to do-zee (do-zee)  
Moshe’s dying to have a date with Susie  
Back to *Yisroel* with your uzi (uzi)

Yes, Judy could outkid any kid. But coexisting with her puckishness was a great sense of purpose. It was Judy who taught us LTP2ers the significance of our camp name, Refuseniks. She took us downtown to stand in the daily vigil outside the Soviet embassy when the Soviets were denying exit visas to Jews. She even pulled off our talk by telephone to an actual Refusenik in the Soviet Union—in 1975, no mean feat. Judy’s leadership that day put us on the cover of *The Jewish Week*. Judy’s example every day opened our young hearts and minds to one of the most important tenets of Judaism: to fight passionately for justice all your life.

Shirley Grossman. Kids love singing her songs. Adults love singing her songs. My fellow staffers on the 1979 Annandale High School newspaper—not a Jew among ’em—loved singing her songs. (The lyrics to Ko-Ko-Kosher Home were posted on the bulletin board next to the newspaper’s style guide. More than 20 years later, I got an out-of-the-blue e-mail from one of those staffers, asking that I forward the lyrics to Ko-Ko-Kosher Home. Seems she was regularly singing them to her newborn son and wanted to make sure she had them right.)

Because her songs are so infectious and such an all-out joy to sing, it’s easy to overlook something. Shirley Grossman is a great artist. Her compositions are rare gems of melody, narrative, economy, and wit. The body of work she created for Achva is stunning in its variety and in its craftsmanship. As if that weren’t enough, often those songs *taught* us something, *educated* us. Shirley Grossman is walking proof that who gets famous truly is a roll of the dice, because Shirley Grossman has the chops of an Arlen, a Berlin, a Rodgers, and one or more Gershwins. In some ways she has those guys beat. How many words do you think Cole Porter could have made from the word *Yerushalayim*?

Adele Greenspon. Adele could have been a shadowy figure at Camp Achva. She was neither a group nor an activities counselor. She was often in the office, where campers, by and large, were not. (That she pulled together the whole grass-roots, seat-of-the-pants, barely-plausible Achva operation, kept it together, made it work, made it wonderful, made it grow to once-unimaginable proportions—all that mattered not at all to us campers. We were too busy enjoying the fruits of that labor.) Yet Adele was perhaps *the* overarching personality at Achva, our fearless and sunny leader, and we felt her presence everywhere. Thank goodness. Because as fun as it was to be that young, we were also mighty vulnerable, our untamed emotions flailing about and changing in a heartbeat. In those moments when a bad stumble or a sudden stomach ache or a fight with a friend struck us with hurt and panic, when unstoppable tears flowed down our cheeks and sometimes turned into big, heaving sobs—I’m away from home; I don’t have my mom or dad here; why did I ever come to this hot, strange, stupid place?—Adele was our protector. Adele held us close and made it better. And from Adele we learned one of life’s great lessons: why begin the day with a plain old “Good morning” when instead you can cry out, “*Bo-kay-ah tsov*, everybaahdy!”

The founding mothers of Camp Achva—Mesdames Frank, Greenspon, Grossman, and Waxman—I salute you, I thank you, I love you.

Deborah M. Brissman