

blindsided

A blue-tinted portrait of a man with dark hair, looking down and to the left. His hands are clasped over his mouth, suggesting a state of shock, grief, or contemplation. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue.

A Jewish Agnostic Finds
the Messiah

Stephen Katz

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By Stephen Katz

Edited by Ruth Rosen



A Purple Pomegranate Book
Purple Pomegranate Productions

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A Jewish Agnostic Finds the Messiah

I can't remember where I first heard Bob Dylan's music, but when I did, he immediately became my hero—nearly a god. His lyrics mirrored my worldview. He was a rebel and a free spirit who held nothing back as he confronted people's lies and hypocrisy. I loved that! I wanted to be like him.

I taught myself to play guitar. After starting on an old black Stella acoustic that I found in my sister's closet, I got a job in a music store and saved enough money to buy the Gibson that hung in the window. I began to see myself as a sort of rough and tumble guy who could break some rules, have some fun and live fast. I stole harmonicas in almost every key and got pretty good, pretty fast. But even though some petty theft seemed to fit in with my new image, it added to my inner conflict. Becoming my own person with my own set of rules was very important to me. But, for better or worse, there were certain things about myself that were not so easy to change.

My name is Stephen Katz and I was born September 2, 1956 in Highland Park, Illinois. I'm the youngest of three children. My brother, Richard is five years older than me, and my sister, Heidi, is four years older.

Our father owned and administrated a nursing home from the time I was nine, and our mother worked in the office. Before the nursing home

there were other businesses, most notably, construction. Dad built several houses and had a pickup truck with the name “Katz and Son” painted on the side, though my brother, the firstborn, was just a baby at the time. The first half of my childhood was spent in Skokie, Illinois—a very Jewish suburb of Chicago. Skokie was known for being a town with one of the highest concentrations of Holocaust survivors in America. Some years after we moved out in 1965, the American Nazi party caused a big controversy by conducting a march down Main Street in Skokie. The drama was such that it became the basis for a Hollywood movie.

Our neighborhood was fairly mixed, but it seemed to me that all my parents’ friends were Jewish. I remember one non-Jewish family who lived across the alley from us. Ironically, their name was Rosen—a typically Jewish surname. But these Rosens were Catholic. Two of the Rosen boys were about my age and we used to play softball together. At Christmas time, they always had a big, colorful tree all lit-up in their living room window. I used to stare at their decorated house from our back door window. There were so many lights. Maybe they were compensating for all the undecorated Jewish homes on the block! I knew that Christmas was the Christian holiday in December, but I really didn’t know what it was about. I used to like to watch Mr. Magoo’s animated “Christmas Carol” each year. I’m sure that Santa and Frosty the Snowman were mixed into my understanding of Christmas, too.

I have other childhood “lights” memories. Hanukkah was always very magical for me. My mother would sing the blessings as she lit the candles. This was one of the only times I can remember hearing her sing. I loved watching the candles glow. I would turn all the lights out and watch them to the very end, when each tiny flame would finally disappear in a spiral of thin smoke. I didn’t mind being alone in the dining room while everyone else went about their business, probably watching TV.

My grandmother on my dad’s side had come over from Poland, my grandfather from Lithuania. After my grandfather died, my father always made sure to take care of my grandmother—so she always

lived very close to us. Grandma Katz was hit by a car the year I was born, the result being a pin in her hip and a severe, lifelong limp. She was Orthodox, spoke with a strong Yiddish accent and kept a kosher home. Her cooking was very different from my mother's and I didn't especially like it when I was young. But by the time I got into high school I had grown to love some of her "specialties," like chicken soup with matzoh balls, sweet and sour cabbage soup and especially her chopped liver. At Passover, my brother and I would always help carry up the heavy boxes of *pesadik* (kosher for passover) dishes from the storage closet in the basement of Grandma Katz's apartment building. During the rest of the year I remember having to pay attention to which silverware drawer I used, or what the pattern of the silverware was, so I could be sure I had either the *fleishik* (meat) or *milchik* (dairy) utensils.

My grandmother had a picture of Chaim Weizman, Israel's first president, on her living room wall—I can still see it in my mind. I don't remember asking who the man in the picture was, but I became acquainted with this important Jewish personality at a fairly young age. During grade school, I would walk over to Grandma Katz's house several times a week for lunch. She and I would visit together in what I remember as very special times for the two of us. She told me how she hoped that I would one day go to Brandeis University. She'd look me in the eyes and simply tell me that I should go to Brandeis because it was a "good" school. Of course, I knew she meant that there were a lot of Jewish students and Jewish programs there. Plus, it was a step along the way to meeting the nice Jewish girl she hoped I would marry. Grandma Katz stressed that it was important for me to "marry Jewish," and when I was old enough to date this became a frequent subject of conversation.

I always felt that my grandmother and I were bound together in a unique way. I remember her with tremendous respect and affection. She was kind, generous and humble. She didn't have much and never wanted more than what she had. She wore plain dresses and lived in a simple one-bedroom apartment. I remember my father arguing with her

when he wanted to buy things that he thought she should have. My father used to talk with his brothers about the fact that their mother would give to any Jewish cause that mailed her an appeal. I guess he thought that she was an “easy mark.” I was always impressed by her generosity to these causes because it came from her deep love for the Jewish people. And she passed that love to her children and her children’s children.

When I was quite young, a boy named Ra’anana and his father came to stay with us for a while. They were from Israel. I didn’t know why they were visiting and I still don’t. But in doing family research, I discovered that this kind of hospitality was a common practice of my grandfather in Lithuania. He had been active in a Zionist organization and would often host travelers whose trips were related to “Palestine,” as it was called at that time.

When I was nine, our family moved in order to shorten my father’s commute to work. A year or two before, my father had built a nursing home in his hometown of Waukegan. The Jewish community there was smaller than Skokie’s, but many of my father’s childhood friends still lived in town. Through them, my parents enjoyed an easy entrance into the Jewish community and Waukegan’s Conservative synagogue, *Am Echod*.

One of my dad’s high school friends lived across the street from us, and our two families were very close. Their four kids and my brother Richard, sister Heidi and I were in the same age range. When their father, Dr. Wool, wanted to find out if someone was Jewish he would ask, “Are they an Indian?” as a code for “Jewish” since Jews, like American Indians, came from tribes. A bunch of us would be standing in their kitchen and if the conversation turned to someone he didn’t know, Dr. Wool would ask, “Are they an Indian?” It was pretty funny, but we all knew what he meant. It was also fun to hear Mrs. Wool tell stories about my father’s teenage antics, such as the time he was caught driving a car across state lines. He was 13 years old.

Though raised in a moderately observant home, my dad didn’t shape our home that way. We really didn’t talk about God. I didn’t know anyone who talked about God, other than the occasional

exclamation, “Oh my God!” or “God forbid!” When it came to Jesus Christ, my mother would blurt out the name if she were angry or frustrated. Other than that, he basically didn’t exist.

I never thought much about God, though I did talk to him during one brief period of my childhood. One of my favorite baseball players on the Chicago White Sox, Carlos May, had blown off part of his thumb in a rifle accident while in the army reserves. During the *Amidah*, our rabbi used to say that we could silently pray our own prayers instead of following the *siddur* text. I used to take that opportunity to pray for Carlos May. I liked praying in my own words for something that mattered to me. I don’t remember how I prayed, but it was probably something simple like “God, please help Carlos May’s thumb get better.” He did come back to play baseball, but I didn’t think much about my prayers actually being answered.

I did wonder about the size of the universe, especially as I lay on my bed waiting to fall asleep. Having learned in school that the universe is infinite, I tried to picture it going out in space in a straight line, forever and ever—past planets and stars, going farther and farther—with no end in sight. My mind couldn’t make sense of space that never ended, so then I’d try to picture the universe somehow contained in a vast bubble. That didn’t make sense either because then there would have to be something on the other side of the bubble. But what could be on the other side if there were no more universe! Then I’d be back at the idea that the universe never ended, which I couldn’t fit into my head. I often fell asleep with such mind-bending puzzles about the universe running through my thoughts.

Though we weren’t religious, we were active in the synagogue. My mom was busy with Hadassah and sisterhood and my dad would join the *minyans* when they needed him to make sure they had enough men (ten are required) for prayer. We always took part in special events and holiday services. Purim carnivals were a lot of fun. One year I dressed as “Super-Mordechai”—the Jewish answer to Superman. My mom made me an outfit of dyed thermal long

johns, with a big “M” instead of “S” on the shirt. I probably looked ridiculous, but it was fun.

Nevertheless, even at synagogue—in the rabbi’s sermons—God didn’t seem important. The messages were usually about Jewish causes: Israel, survival of Jewish identity, politics, ethics, Jewish history and tradition. I didn’t think about it much, and truthfully I didn’t listen all that well as I, like many others, whispered with friends during the sermon.

My grandmother was the one person in our family who seemed sincerely religious. I respected her commitment to tradition and her strict observance of the holidays. Everything she was and did seemed Jewish.

We attended *Am Echod*, a Conservative synagogue, built in 1928. I recall the arches and domes and the smell of mildew in the basement, where our classrooms were. One of my Hebrew school friends used to slap a chain against the decaying walls of the bathroom, causing chunks of plaster to fall out. By the late sixties, the entire building was in disrepair, and plans were made for a new building that would be on our side of town.

I attended Hebrew school after regular school, and I also went to Sunday school. One year, due to a scheduling conflict with the building, we had Sunday school on Saturdays. Our teacher, Mrs. Levin, wouldn’t let us write anything because it was Shabbat. We thought it would be an easy ride, but it was actually more difficult, since we had to memorize our lessons and be tested orally. Mrs. Levin was a kind old lady who loved Bible stories. We learned a lot about Jacob, his sons and the twelve tribes of Israel.

We celebrated the holidays and they created an annual rhythm in our home, but again, we were not religious. For example, on Yom Kippur, going to services on the first evening and the morning was enough for my dad, and therefore enough for the rest of us. We came back for Grandma Katz in the evening when services were over.

Although sitting through the services wasn’t a spiritual experience for me, on the High Holidays I felt a sense of excitement over seeing the

sanctuary filled to capacity. Waukegan had the closest Jewish community to the Great Lakes naval training base, so all the Jewish sailors would come to our synagogue for those special days. As a kid I found it curious to see these men in uniform packing out the building.

The drama of the shofar blasts on Rosh Hashanah and watching the cantor bowing his face to the ground on Yom Kippur impressed me. My dad would fast, resting in his favorite chair in the den. I wasn't expected to fast when I was young, but I remember feeling guilty one year when my mom cooked me a kosher hot dog for lunch. I felt bad for subjecting my dad to the aroma, so I ate it quickly in the kitchen.

I began to fast after my bar mitzvah, but even then I wasn't very good at it. One year I went to see friends (one of whom was not Jewish) after services. As we walked outside together they offered me some popcorn. I took some, started chewing and then, in a panic, I suddenly remembered that I was supposed to be fasting. I began spitting out popcorn on the ground until nothing was left in my mouth. My friends were pretty amused.

I went to Jack Benny Junior High School, which was just a few blocks down from the synagogue. Mr. Benny (his real name was Benjamin Kubelsky) and his family had been members there. His father, Meyer Kubelsky, was named on a plaque outside our sanctuary, along with many others who had given money to build the synagogue. Mr. Benny had a practice of coming to town every year or two, and the days his limousine pulled up were pretty exciting. All of the students would know he was coming to speak with us during lunchtime, so we kept looking out the windows to spot his arrival. I knew, of course, that he would stop by the synagogue first, since it was just down the street.

I was 12 years old when I had my first experience with anti-Semitism. I was in the lobby of our junior high school. A tall, blond girl yelled at me, "Dirty Jew!" I didn't know what I had done or why she called me that. I was well liked by most kids and had certainly never been the object of hatred. In my

confusion, the only response I could think of was to yell back, “Go to hell!” I wasn’t particularly proud of my response. I kept it to myself and didn’t talk with my parents about it. I avoided the girl after that, knowing that she was my enemy.

At that same time, my good friend Art and I were attending weekly Shabbat morning services. In our synagogue, Friday night was the bigger service. The old men and a few old women would go on Saturday mornings. But my friend Art and I made an agreement with each other to go each Saturday morning. We were approaching our bar mitzvahs and this seemed like a way to step up to the religious plate. After services, we’d participate in the *kiddush* and take a little wine or schnapps with the old guys. I think they enjoyed our presence. We may have thought we were getting away with something by having the alcohol, but mostly we felt good being accepted as “one of the guys.” Going to services like that was kind of fun and it felt right.

As far as Hebrew school, I worked hard to prepare for my bar mitzvah. I was a good student, and since I learned quickly my teacher gave me extra material. Leo Grad, my teacher, was an older man who had come from Europe. He had a habit of speaking just inches away from my face. His breath was strong and a string of saliva seemed to hang like a bridge between his upper and lower lips whenever he opened his mouth. Despite these unpleasant peculiarities, his positive influence in my life was very substantial. He was very warm-hearted and loved Judaism and the Jewish people. He always greeted me with a smile and was quick to put his arm around me. Once, when I began to cry because I didn’t know my lesson very well, he treated me kindly and didn’t add to the guilt I felt for disappointing him.

I used to practice chanting prayers throughout the day, singing the full *kiddush* and other prayers in the shower. I remember the cantor complimenting me one night after he heard me chant some prayers. I felt proud. So in addition to my *Torah* and *Haftorah* portions, I learned to lead the entire *shacharit* (morning) and *musaf* (additional)

services—usually the role of the *chazan* (cantor). I did very well and that was important to me.

Mr. Grad invested much of his time in teaching young people what it means to be Jewish. In tutoring us for our bar mitzvahs he helped us to understand the importance of taking our place in the Jewish community. When one of my friends stopped attending weekly services after his bar mitzvah, I remember Mr. Grad reflecting that some day he would come back, that eventually “all do.” I always wondered if that was true, whether even those who give up on Judaism inevitably come back. I wondered if this Jewish kid, who preferred partying to praying, would one day return. And I suppose I wondered how things would play out in my own life.

I was one of the first bar mitzvah boys to have his ceremony in the brand new building. The new synagogue couldn't have been more different from the old. It had a big stained glass window of the Tree of Life behind the *bimah* (platform), and smaller stained glass windows along the side wall of the sanctuary. Between all that color and the rectangular shape, it was clearly a new, modern day for the Waukegan Jewish community. Unfortunately, the stained glass windows, which were predominantly blue and green, cast a slightly ghoulish pall over everyone. We learned to live with it and enjoyed the new sanctuary.

My bar mitzvah was a big event. I had been eight years old when my brother was a bar mitzvah. My parents hosted his celebration at my grandparents' house where the kids danced in the garage to music played on 45 rpm records by Manny Schwartz the DJ. By the time my bar mitzvah rolled around, my parents were able to make the celebration a bigger affair. We held it in a big circus tent in our backyard.

The actual bar mitzvah service went off without a hitch. I did well on Friday night, and on Saturday morning I led the congregation through the entire service. It was a great feeling to lead all the old guys through the prayers. Of course they knew more than I did, but on this day I could appear to know just as much.

For a short time after my bar mitzvah I continued going to Hebrew school, but before long my friends and I were distracted by other pursuits. We stopped attending synagogue and Hebrew school, except for Sunday school, which was mandatory for the next few years.

I was involved with BBYO (B'nai B'rith Youth Organization) throughout high school, serving as vice president of our local chapter. BBYO focused on building Jewish community and identity. My brother and sister had been active and it was natural for me to get involved. I enjoyed making friends with Jewish kids from around the state. It was more a social experience than a religious one—but of course it was fully Jewish.

During high school, my participation in our synagogue dropped. Mr. Grad would call me once in a while and ask me to do things, like chant from the *megillah* (Book of Esther) at Purim. Despite his kind efforts to involve me, like most of the youth, I continued to drift away.

My neighborhood friends included both Jews and Gentiles. None of us was religious. I remember playing basketball with some Lutheran friends and asking them what the Trinity was, because I was curious. They couldn't answer and I didn't pursue it. They did tell me that the New Testament writers were Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, which I thought was funny and not at all religious sounding. After all, I had friends named Mark and John!

I can't remember any friend ever really telling me about Jesus at any time during grade school, junior high or high school years. During my sophomore year in high school, a Jewish friend and I went to a Christian coffeehouse that had just opened up in town. We knew it was a Christian place, but my friend, a dyed-in-the-wool atheist, and I went for the entertainment value. We figured we would could make fun of the Christians and get some laughs, and in fact we did.

My interests in high school were sports and girls. I didn't know if there was a God and I did not care to know. I guess I was an apathetic agnostic. I wasn't going to bother God, if he existed, and I didn't need him to bother me. I followed my parents' tradition towards a strong but secular Jewish identity. I was in honors classes,

played on the soccer and basketball teams and was popular. For the first two or three years things were good.

After a disillusioning experience with the basketball coach during my junior year, I decided not to go out for the team my senior year. That same year my grandmother died. It was my first real experience with death and I didn't know how to respond—especially given my bond with her. I went to a 24-hour restaurant to drink coffee all night and think about life. It didn't make sense anymore. If we all die, what's the point? If everything is temporary, where is the meaning? I certainly didn't see any meaning in making money. My parents and their friends were financially comfortable, but they didn't seem particularly happy.

By my senior year, my interests had shifted from sports to music and marijuana. I was getting high on a fairly regular basis. I tried to observe everything and everyone around me, hoping to find meaning. I began to see that friends who did a lot of partying weren't happy either. Some drank a lot. Some smoked a lot of marijuana or used other drugs, but except for brief highs they didn't seem happy or satisfied. I knew I wasn't. I had no interest in turning on Pink Floyd, turning off the lights and staring, stoned, at the little red light on the stereo! Anyway, parties always seemed to end with scandals and stories of who did what and seemed like another dead end.

No one seemed to care about what they were doing or why. Everyone seemed to be going through the motions without bothering to think. I began declining invitations to hang out with friends. I became arrogant, believing I understood what no one else did. I stared at people with critical eyes, not realizing that I made them uncomfortable, until one day a girl told me so. The truth was, I was pretty unhappy. I couldn't produce any great answers to give my life meaning outside of my own cheerless attempts to take control of life and follow my own conscience.

I can't remember where I first heard Bob Dylan's music, but when I did, he immediately became my hero—nearly a god. His lyrics mirrored my worldview. He was a rebel and a free spirit who held

nothing back as he confronted people's lies and hypocrisy. I loved that! I wanted to be like him.

I taught myself to play guitar. After starting on an old black Stella acoustic that I found in my sister's closet, I got a job in a music store and saved enough money to buy the Gibson that hung in the window. I began to see myself as a sort of rough and tumble guy who could break some rules, have some fun and live fast. I stole harmonicas in almost every key and got pretty good, pretty fast. But even though some petty theft seemed to fit in with my new image, it added to my inner conflict. Becoming my own person with my own set of rules was very important to me. But for better or worse, there were certain things about myself that were not so easy to change.

Meanwhile, practicing music for hours and writing songs were welcome outlets from what I cynically deemed the mindless pursuits of my friends and family. As I withdrew from them, my parents and my best friends began to worry about me.

I decided I would go to college, with the likelihood of dropping out before long. That's what Dylan had done. I'd stay close to campus, soak up musical influences, then try to "make it" in music. I figured I would change my name like Dylan had. I was trying to escape my identity as an upper middle-class kid from the suburbs. I wasn't going to be bound by my upbringing and training. I would carve my own path.

So I went off to the University of Illinois at Urbana, determined to create a new identity for myself. I wanted to be the rebel, the non-conformist. I wanted recognition for my music. I played in a few shows in dorms or frat houses, and imagined all kinds of names for myself, but never settled on one. As I tried to recreate myself, I figured that I would uncover the real me, only the real me didn't always match up with the new image I was trying to project. I still cared about some of the things I had labeled as meaningless.

Rhetoric was a required course at the University of Illinois so I enrolled, never suspecting that it would change the course of my life. The professor, Dr. Palmer, was Jewish and he immediately sized me up.

One day he passed out a “Peanuts” cartoon and told us to expound on its meaning. Rather than take the assignment seriously, I wrote a “stream of consciousness,” piece with no punctuation or order. I just let my thoughts rip across the page. He gave me an “F” and confronted my blatantly flippant attitude. He told me that if I didn’t want to be there, I should get the “bleep” out of his class. Though I didn’t want to care, I respected him for the way he handled me.

I had always gotten good grades. Now that I was trying to be a nonconformist, I figured I’d refuse to “play the game.” According to my new attitude, the “F” and what my professor thought about me shouldn’t have mattered, but it did. I still cared what people thought and still measured myself at least in part by the achievement my grades reflected. Even though I had already planned to quit school before I started, I found it hard to accept academic failure. I allowed myself to go into a zoology final exam with a “D,” but I aced the test and pulled out a “B” for the class. I couldn’t shake who I had always been.

So when Professor Palmer assigned a major research paper that was going to count for about 80 percent of our final grade, I was not happy. About six weeks into the semester, I entered his office with a group of students. We were supposed to give a progress report on our papers. When I told him that I had not yet chosen a topic, he told me to wait while he helped the others. He knew what I was about and he resigned himself to saving me, the “troublemaker,” for last.

While I waited for my turn, an idea for the paper popped into my head. It took me by surprise and captured my imagination. I was so excited that I interrupted another student’s consultation as I blurted out, “Professor Palmer, I’m going to write my paper on why the Jews at the time of Jesus didn’t think he was the Messiah.” He was interested. When he’d finished with the others and just the two of us remained in the room, he told me that he too, had looked into the subject and knew something about it. “Therefore,” he said, “I’m going to be more critical of your paper than I will be on the others.” Maybe it was payback, but more likely he really cared about his students and knew I needed a little extra challenge.

But I was already motivated to dig into the topic. I already had a Bible—I'd stolen a Gideon's Bible from a hotel to help my songwriting. Dylan used so much biblical imagery that I thought I should familiarize myself with it. But now I was really ready to explore and discover.

I began my research by acquainting myself with the Jewish ideas concerning the Messiah. I knew nothing about the concept, other than a vague notion that the Messiah was supposed to change the world for the better. Now I needed to do hard core research and use historical and biblical sources to determine what the Jewish people in the first century were expecting—and why Jesus didn't fit the portrait. I read what traditional Jewish scholars had to say on the subject—as well as what Christian scholars, secular historians and textual critics had written.

The odd thing was, I don't even know how I knew that Jesus ever claimed to be our Messiah in the first place. I had never read the New Testament. There were plenty of Christians on campus, but they weren't *my* friends! I don't remember ever hearing any Christians talking about Jesus in terms of Jewish expectations. My only explanation is that God put the idea into my head.

I wanted my research to include interviews as well as written materials and I wanted to hear both sides—so I met with two rabbis and two Christian ministers. It was natural to go to the Hillel rabbi since he was right on campus. I found the other rabbi through the Yellow Pages. For the pastors, I selected one because he was the leader of a big Baptist church I had noticed on campus. The other was a referral from my girlfriend. Her brother was a religious Christian who had told her that if she ever needed some kind of help, she should go see this pastor.

I asked the rabbis questions like, “Why do you think the Jewish people of Jesus' time rejected him?” and “What is the Messiah supposed to do and how will our people recognize him?” The Hillel rabbi invested a lot of time talking about the many different Jewish philosophies and sects that were prevalent at the time of Jesus. I have to admit that much of what he said was over my head and didn't seem

particularly relevant, but I appreciated his efforts to help me. I went to the synagogue to see the other rabbi and he responded in a more visceral way. He was a Holocaust survivor from Europe and was quite upset that I would even ask why our people did not believe. “In light of the Holocaust” he said to me, “I find this subject abhorrent! Besides which, I’m not going to do your work for you. You need to read more!” He was obviously agitated, though he did recommend some books. I already had those books in hand from my hours in the library, but I didn’t say so since it didn’t take much to see that he wasn’t interested in talking or in my staying any longer.

I asked the Christian pastors the same sorts of questions. There was an odd kind of symmetry, inasmuch as one of the pastors talked about a lot of things that were over my head and didn’t seem relevant, quoting from various Christian theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr and Karl Barth. The other pastor responded on more of a heart level.

Of the four clergy with whom I met, the most engaging was the referral, Pastor Dick Foth. As soon as I walked into his office and we were done with introductions, he asked if my questions were for my paper or for Stephen Katz. I was surprised, but not put off by his directness. I let him know that my questions were actually for my paper *and* for Stephen Katz. In the course of my research, I’d begun to realize that my interest was not merely academic. It seemed to be morphing into part of my personal search for meaning.

Pastor Foth told me stories about a Jewish friend of his, Arthur Katz (no relation to me), who was a Jewish believer in Jesus. He described an interaction between Katz and a rabbi, in which Katz asked the rabbi several questions about various Bible passages. Each time, the rabbi would take down a commentary from his shelf to see what the Jewish sages had to say before answering. Finally, Katz asked the rabbi about a verse penned by the prophet Zechariah, which points to a pierced Messiah coming to earth. When the rabbi went to reach for a commentary, Katz stopped him and asked him about his own opinion regarding the meaning of the text. The rabbi had no answer.



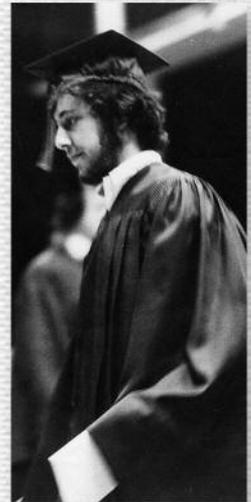
My brother Richard, sister Heidi and me in 1957



My Grandma Katz and me at my bar mitzvah



My bar mitzvah photo



My high school graduation



My confirmation class (I'm second from the left in the back row)

*Milking
cows while
at a
kibbutz in
Israel*



In my "Dylan days"



Laura and me with a friend, '70s



Just before we were married



Our wedding day



Four generations: Great Grandpa Sparberg, 84 years old (left); Grandpa Katz, 60 years old (right), Pa Katz, 27 years old (center); Ari Katz two weeks old



Heidi, Richard and me in a more current photo



Laura's parents, Mr. Uno and Mrs. Johanna Vesanen, my youngest daughter, Mia, and my parents, Mr. Jerome and Mrs. Dorothy Katz at Mia's bat mitzvah



I'm often called on to lead singing and play guitar



Sharing my faith in New York City



Our whole family: Hani, Mia, Ari, Laura, me and Talia

The minister ended our interview with a challenge. “Stephen,” he said, “the only way for you to know if Jesus was the Messiah, is to ask him into your life. I can tell you that if you do that, you will know the answer one way or the other. If he is just a myth, your life won’t change at all. But if he is who he claimed to be—the Messiah of Israel—then your life will begin to change and you’ll know it’s true.” His challenge made immediate sense to me, but I didn’t take him up on it. First of all, I’m naturally cautious and this sounded like a huge, potentially life-changing step. But there was something working on a deeper level. I wasn’t the greatest Jewish kid in the world, but I was Jewish enough to know one thing: Jesus wasn’t for me; he wasn’t for my people. He may be for anybody else, but he’s *not* for the Jews.

Nevertheless, halfway through my research I was beginning to lean in the direction that it just might be true—that Jesus might actually be the Messiah.

I hadn’t heard anything about Jesus or the Messiah as a kid and now I was facing what seemed to be compelling reasons to believe he might be the one. The entire question of the Messiah was essentially Jewish, yet no one had talked about it as far as I could recall.

In Sunday school we learned the major Bible stories about the patriarchs and the twelve tribes of Israel, but there was absolutely no mention of the Messiah. I don’t know if anyone in my synagogue even expected a Messiah. Now, I had entered a new world. I found out that there is a huge amount of biblical material on the subject.

As I continued my research, it seemed that the Jewish scholars dealt with the text of key Messianic prophecies in such a manner so that they couldn’t possibly refer to Jesus. They would offer several possible explanations that often struck me as being more about who the Messiah was not than who he was or would be. To me, the Christian explanations of these passages were more reasonable. Being a novice to the text, and reading both sides, I asked myself which explanations made the most sense out of the actual text.

One of these passages was the 53rd chapter of Isaiah. I didn't know much about Jesus, but from what I'd begun reading in the New Testament, it sounded like the events at the end of his life. It certainly didn't sound like Israel, which is what most of the Jewish authors said. "We did not esteem him . . . he was wounded for our transgressions . . . the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." The passage speaks of one who dies for "our" sin and is buried. Yet after this occurs he "shall see the labor of his soul and be satisfied," implying a return to life from the dead. It certainly didn't sound like Israel—my Jewish people—and the pronouns seemed to rule out that theory entirely. The prophet identified himself with the people by using the terms "we" and "us." By contrasting the "we" and "us" with the subject of the entire passage, that subject just *couldn't* be Israel, the whole nation. It *had* to be someone else. I wondered, "Could it be Jesus?" And if it were, what would this mean for me? I wasn't really sure.

As I wrote the paper I didn't disclose my struggle—that I, a Jew, was thinking seriously that Jesus might be the Messiah. I merely reported the views of the Jewish scholars to answer the question I had posed. I got an "A" on the paper and was relieved to be done with it. Perhaps as an emotional defense, I chose to shelve my unanswered personal questions so I could go on living the lifestyle I was comfortable with and pursue my dream of being a singer/songwriter.

The winter break from school was pivotal. At a New Year's party, I looked around the room at all my friends and could not help thinking that we had all "floated down a river" into college. We had been carried along by the expectations that others had ingrained in us. That night, I decided it was time to implement my plan to take my life into my own hands, to quit school and begin to shape my own future. And so I returned for my second semester, but quit within a month.

It wasn't long, however, before I came face to face with my own limitations and failure to be who I thought I could be. I had written a few songs and sung them in a few small venues, but I was intimidated by the talented artists I saw perform at the larger folk

venues in town. I found that I lacked the confidence to really put myself out there and audition for those venues. I became frustrated with myself. I was confronted with my own lack of belief in myself and I questioned my level of talent.

Now out of school, I stayed in Champaign/Urbana, first taking a job in a pizza bar and then later in an industrial bakery that supplied the largest grocery chains in Illinois. I worked alongside a lot of guys who had been working their shift for 20 or more years. Of course when I told my parents I had quit school, they were shocked and very worried. They insisted that I see a psychologist for an evaluation. After a friendly conversation in which he probed my dreams of pursuing music (to see if I was fully in touch with reality), he called my parents to let them know that he had deemed me certifiably sane!

Meanwhile, some three or four months after I'd written my paper and shelved the whole Jesus issue, my girlfriend Laura said, "Guess what? Jesus and I got together last night!" Not exactly sure what she meant, I didn't fight her on it. I figured if that made her happy, fine with me. Laura's parents were Finnish immigrants who had raised her in a devoutly Christian home. At some point in high school she had turned her back on her upbringing. As her father might have put it, she "drank, smoked and acted like the devil." Laura and I had been in school together since the sixth grade, but we didn't start dating until after high school graduation. She thought she'd be "safe from Jesus" by getting together with a Jewish boyfriend. When I started writing my paper on Jesus, I had no idea that she was inwardly panicking. Her fears were based on the fact that she knew that Jesus was true, and that she'd been wrong to turn her back on him. Several months later, in a telephone conversation with her sister, Laura prayed to ask God for forgiveness and to recommit herself to following Jesus.

In time, Laura began to read the Bible. Occasionally she would ask me what I thought about various passages. She wasn't trying to manipulate me, but genuinely wanted my help as she tried to understand what she was reading. As I looked at the Bible again for the first time since finishing my paper, the questions my research had

raised flooded back into my mind. I recalled the one minister's challenge about how to find out if Jesus truly was the Messiah. I also began to watch Laura change. She had always loved being the center of attention, even if at times it meant being loud and obnoxious. I saw her begin to soften and become more considerate of others. She used to love to party, but now she was uncomfortable with even my quiet use of marijuana. She seemed centered and more purposeful about life. She was different and I noticed. In fact, it seemed she had found some of the meaning and confidence that I had been seeking.

I met a few other Christians as well and saw similar qualities. I began to pray in a personal way that I hadn't done since praying for Carlos May as a kid. "If there is a God, show me. And if Jesus is the Messiah I'm willing to find out."

It may sound silly, but I prayed about something else that had an impact on me. Laura and I had an Irish Setter puppy named Lukas that we loved. One day we lost him. That night a furious, Midwest snowstorm dumped several feet of snow and brought bone chilling winds. Lukas was so young and so small that I was sure he'd never make it. I asked Laura to pray that we find him. Instead of agreeing to pray, she kicked it back to me and said, "*You* pray!" I wasn't experienced at praying, but I cared about the dog so I tried. I supposed this could be a test. If we got our puppy back it could be a sign that God was real and cared about us. A couple of days later we got a phone call from someone who had found Lukas—quite a distance away. He had survived the ice and snow and been found, then returned to us. It made quite an impression on me.

That spring, Laura's brother Joel was the bus driver for a Christian music group called "The Living Sound." They were coming to our hometown of Waukegan, and she invited me to come to a church where they were playing. I agreed to go on two conditions: I wanted to drive separately from her and her family and I did not want to sit with them. I had never set foot in a church other than when I interviewed the pastors for my college paper. I felt threatened and would only do it on my terms, independently from them and free to leave at any time.

The song lyrics that I heard sounded bizarre. One bouncy medley they sang went like this: “I’m gonna stay right under the blood. I’m gonna stay right under the blood. I’m gonna stay right under the blood . . . where the devil can’t do me no harm.”

I had just seen *The Exorcist* and had been scared to my bones! The song sounded really creepy to me. What on earth were they singing about? I had no clue. But the brief talk that the preacher gave made sense. He said that some people there might have problems in their lives that they couldn’t fix. Maybe some of those problems seemed as large as mountains. But then he said, “Jesus can move mountains.” Surprisingly, that made sense to me. I had a problem that I couldn’t fix. Life made no sense to me and that was depressing. No matter where I looked I couldn’t find meaning. Money wasn’t the answer. Partying wasn’t the answer. Nothing on earth lasted. Life couldn’t be pointless or it wouldn’t be worth living.

By now, I had been praying more often. I believed in God, though I never really talked about it. I felt agitated and wanted answers. I was just crying out and those outcries were some kind of a prayer.

Laura invited me to see her brother’s group the next night, but I declined. Though I felt a “pull” to go, my inner “push” was stronger. Maybe I did see something different and attractive in Christians. Maybe Jesus *was* the Messiah, but still—I was Jewish and it just didn’t feel right to move closer to him. It seemed like it would mean moving away from my own people. But that night, when Laura and her family were at the concert, I was completely stirred up inside. I remember actually pacing in my parents’ family room as thoughts raced through my mind. “What do I believe? Was Jesus the Messiah? Why am I upset? What am I going to do? What’s going on?”

A few weeks later, I did go to see Joel’s music group again, this time in Dayton, Ohio. They did the same presentation that I had seen before, so I knew that at the end of the concert they would invite people to come up and talk with band members—either to receive Jesus into their life or to talk over personal matters. I prayed an unusual prayer. “God, if you want me to go up there, you have to get

me out of my chair and move my legs.” I felt completely unable to take such a step on my own.

At the end of the concert, I did walk forward to find Laura’s brother. He said, “Hi, Steve. What’s happening?” “I don’t know, Joel,” I responded, “but I want to know Jesus.” He sat down with me and, to make sure I knew what I was saying, he opened a Bible to take me through a few verses.

Joel asked me a very important question. “What do you think your family will say about this?” Of course I knew that receiving Jesus wouldn’t please my family and that telling them about such a decision could be pretty rough. But something important had occurred. The approval of my family and even my community, which mattered very much to me even when I was trying to be a rebel, had come to matter less than the approval of the God of my ancestors. At the end of May 1975, I took that step of receiving Jesus into my life.

I discovered that Laura had mobilized a lot of people to pray for me to recognize and follow Jesus. In fact, on the night that she prayed with her sister to follow Jesus, her first impulse afterwards was to ask her sister to pray for me. Her sister said something to the effect of, “Laura, don’t get your hopes up.” But Laura’s hopes *were* up and she didn’t stop praying and believing that God could get through to me.

On my drive back to Illinois that night I stopped at a gas station to use the rest room. I stood in front of the mirror staring at my reflection. Was I the same or was I different? I looked the same. My hair wasn’t blond, my eyes weren’t Asian, my skin wasn’t black. I was still the same Jewish kid I had been a couple hours earlier. But in some real way that was difficult to understand, I knew I was different inside. I felt lighter and more hopeful.

I began reading the Bible voraciously. I started going to Dick Foth’s church each week. I was still working at the factory, and I started telling everyone about the changes in my life. Many of my co-workers were African American, and as I talked with them about Jesus many invited me to visit their churches. I was having

a great time. I found out about a Christian outreach of college students to high school students and I got involved. I was the only Jew on the volunteer staff of 25.

But then there was my family. What would I say to them and how would I say it?

I decided to see, without saying anything, if they would notice the changes in my life. I had not been very communicative with them (or anyone) for a couple of years. I had been so wrapped up in myself, posturing as a cynic. But now, whenever we spoke by phone I let my parents know that I loved them. I hadn't said that in a long time. We talked like parents and children should talk. Over the summer, our relationship began to heal.

That fall, when I went home for my birthday, I told them about my faith. I was pretty nervous. As we sat in the den, I said, "You remember the paper I wrote about Jesus a year ago for school? Well, I've come to believe that he *is* our Messiah." The conversation wasn't easy, especially when my mother started to cry.

Later that night, my father couldn't sleep and I heard him walk downstairs to the den. I followed him, knowing how upset he must be. As we talked, he wondered out loud how my friends and I could all go to college with such differing outcomes. One studied business, another engineering and I come home and say I believe in Jesus. It was a complete mystery to him, which is understandable. I don't know if I could have fully explained how I came to believe.

Meanwhile, my mother thought I had been brainwashed and that someone had "spoon-fed" Christianity to me. She also believed that I wanted to assimilate into Gentile American society. The United Nations had just passed a resolution equating Zionism with racism. "Stephen," my mother warned, "there is going to be a new wave of anti-Semitism in this country and you're just trying to hide." There was nothing I could say to change her perspective. Only time could make a difference.

As I continued to work in the factory and grow in my faith, I began to sense something from my Bible reading. God is

incredibly concerned for the downtrodden in society—the poor, the orphans, widows, all those who are hungry, homeless and lost. The more I read, the more I sensed that I needed to involve myself in these causes. I decided to return to school. I got my bachelor's and master's degrees in social work and was employed in the field of child welfare for ten years. I worked with children and teens who were wards of the state of Illinois, usually after having been abused and neglected. We cared for them on many levels and as they reached the age of 21, prepared them for independent living.

Three weeks after I graduated with my bachelor's degree, I married my girlfriend, Laura. We had a Jewish wedding in which we expressed our shared faith in the Messiah Jesus. It was not easy for my family, but thankfully they did come. My family has demonstrated an ability to put loving relationships above anything that might separate us. While I've seen other Jewish believers lose family relationships because of their faith, this did not happen in my case. Sure, there were many awkward—even tense—moments, but we never lost sight of the love that holds us together. I have been praying for my family to know Jesus as their Messiah for over 25 years, and I believe that God is at work in their lives.

Laura and I now have four children: Hani, Arieh, Talia and Mikaela. Their names are all derivatives from Hebrew. Laura and I spent our second year of marriage living on a kibbutz in Israel, during which time we fell in love with a few names that we decided to use for our own children.

We have raised our children with the knowledge that Jesus is the promised Jewish Messiah, and also with an understanding of what it means to be Jewish believers in him. In our home we celebrate the Jewish holidays and our kids have all had bar and bat mitzvahs as a way of expressing their intent to identify with our people.

After eight or nine years in my profession, I started to get another sense about the work I was doing. I began to recognize that as important as the help we gave to the young people we worked with

was, it was also essentially temporary. Remember, much of my search involved a longing for meaning and for something that would last. I began to think about the fact that even the good work I was doing wouldn't last forever. If I helped a teen get a job or find an apartment or learn to function well in society, none of those things would matter once his life was over. None of those things would matter in eternity. Somewhere along the way I had heard that there are only two things that last: God's word and people. The Bible says, "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isaiah 40:8). It also says, "many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Daniel 12:2).

In addition to my growing desire to invest myself in something lasting was my love for my own people. My family and I were active in a Messianic Jewish congregation, and I had always taken opportunities to speak with Jewish people who were interested in my faith. So it all came together for me that I should invest all my time and energy in people and the word of God. I applied to join the staff of Jews for Jesus. I would strive to reach my own people with the good news that our Messiah has come and that his name is Y'shua—Jesus.

I've been serving with Jews for Jesus since 1989. In that time I've served in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Washington, D.C. I've had the chance to oversee our traveling music team, write some songs and produce some albums. I find it incredible that God has allowed me to use those strands from my past—social work skills and musical talents—to serve and honor him. Missionary work is sometimes difficult, monotonous or just mundane. At times, it's standing on street corners for hours, facing unpleasant comments and rejection. At other times it might involve writing reports or sitting in planning meetings. But in its best moments it's sitting with people, my own people, one on one—discussing the Bible and watching God work in their lives. It's praying for people and seeing hearts and lives change.

Life is filled with little ironies. A few years after I began following

Jesus, Bob Dylan also professed faith in him as the Messiah. I don't know where he stands now on the issue. I do know that following Jesus blends two seemingly opposite strands. True followers of Jesus *are* non-conformists. Think what you will about Christianity as a dominant culture in the United States, but the truth is that Jesus' teachings are far more radical than most people care to think. And for a Jew, clearly there is a rather painful choice to depart from the prevailing Jewish notion of who Jesus is. This makes us non-conformists whether we care to be or not.

At the same time, true followers of Jesus are willing to conform to ideas, attitudes and, perhaps most important, hopes which originated in the Jewish Bible, but have been lost to so many of our people today. I had no idea when I was trying to recreate my identity that God had a very different spiritual makeover in store for my life. He knew I was looking for meaning and something that would last. He didn't force it on me, but when I began asking leading questions, he somehow provided the answers that pointed to Jesus.

I don't know if you believe in Jesus or not. If you do, please share this booklet with others who might want to hear my story. Perhaps they will be challenged to take an objective look at Jesus' claims to be our promised Messiah. If you are not sure whether Jesus is who he claimed to be, but genuinely want to know, I'm confident that God will provide answers for you just as he did for me and for so many others. And if I can have a part in helping with that, I'd be happy to hear from you and to try to answer any questions you might have.

*If you find that you do believe in Jesus but are not certain how to follow through on that belief, please turn to the back flap of this booklet.

If you would like to read other stories of Jews who are for Jesus, check out the Jews for Jesus web site (www.jewsforjesus.org), write for more information or e-mail Stephen at jfj@jewsforjesus.org.

Jews for Jesus International Headquarters
60 Haight Street, San Francisco, CA 94102-5895

For titles such as those below, check out Purple Pomegranate Productions (www.store.jewsforjesus.org).

Books:

Testimonies of Jews Who Believe in Jesus, Ruth Rosen, Editor

Jewish Doctors Meet the Great Physician, Ruth Rosen, Editor

The Last Jew of Rotterdam, Ernest Cassutto

Between Two Fathers, Charles Barg, M.D.

Bound for the Promised Land, Haya Benhayim with Menahem Benhayim

Booklets:

Drawn to Jesus: The Journey of a Jewish Artist, David Rothstein

Who Ever Heard of a Jewish Missionary? Bob Mendelsohn

Loss to Life, Susan Perlman

Nothing to Fear, Karol Joseph

Hineni: Here am I, but Where are You? Tuvya Zaretsky

Shalom at Last, Shlomy Abramov

From Generation to Generation, Steve Wertheim

DVDs and Videos:

Survivor Stories: Finding Hope from an Unlikely Source

*Sam Rotman Concert Pianist: The Music and Testimony of a
Jew for Jesus*

Forbidden Peace: The Story Behind the Headlines

Whether you consider yourself Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, religious or not, if you are looking for a personal relationship with God, please consider the following:

1. God is concerned with every aspect of your life.

“Can a woman forget her nursing child, and not have compassion on the son of her womb? Surely they may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands . . .” (Isaiah 49:15,16a).

2. You can't truly experience God's love because of sin.

“But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear” (Isaiah 59:2).

3. God provided Y'shua (Jesus) to be your sin-bearer and Savior.

“But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).

4. You can receive forgiveness of sins and a personal relationship with God by asking Y'shua to reign in your heart.

“. . . if you confess with your mouth the Lord Y'shua and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation” (Romans 10:9,10).

If you believe these verses and want to follow Y'shua, there is a prayer on the inside cover that will help you begin a new life.

“God of Abraham, I know that I have sinned against you and I want to turn from my sins. I believe you provided Y’shua as a once and for all atonement for me. With this prayer, I place my trust in Y’shua as my Savior and my Lord. I thank you for cleansing me of sin, and for giving me peace with you and eternal life through the Messiah’s death and resurrection. Please help me be faithful in learning to trust and love you more each day. Amen.”

(Please print)

Name _____

Street _____

City _____ State _____ Postal Code _____

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E-mail _____

I have read the texts from the Bible and have prayed the prayer to claim the abundant and eternal life that the Messiah Y’shua can give me. I sign my name as a commitment to make him my Savior and Lord.

Signed _____

Date _____

I really don’t understand or believe these texts yet. Please contact me, as I am seriously willing to consider and seek what God has for me.

I am already a believer in Y’shua and want to know more about Jews for Jesus.

I am Jewish I am Gentile

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