

Confessions OF A Hollywood Dropout

Rick Magder practically grew up on a movie set, but he gave up the chance to have a dazzling Hollywood career for a life of Torah.

*Murray Magder, who in his first feature film directed one of the future stars of *The Sopranos*, checked into Aish HaTorah for a year to “detox.” Now he’s Moshe and lives with his wife and four kids in Passaic, New Jersey.*

It’s around 7:30 p.m., and I’m standing on Hollywood’s Sunset Boulevard. Suddenly, a young man starts running in my direction. He looks frantic. As he gets closer the beads of sweat on his forehead become visible. There is a look of horror in his eyes. He’s looking right at me. He’s getting close—fifty feet, twenty-five, ten. He’s about to run me over, and then I yell, “Cut. That was great.” I slap him on the back and say, “That’s a wrap for today.” The day’s shooting on my student film—a black-and-white thriller about a killer steak that comes to life in the meat section of a grocery store—comes to an end.

It was 1980, and I was finishing up a few months of an intensive film studies program at Sherwood Oaks Experimental College in Los Angeles. Most of the students in the program were already working in the film business in one capacity or another and were there to develop or improve their skills. The teaching staff was also made up of professionals who were in between projects. Among the many classes I took was a directing workshop with the legendary Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci, who worked on films such as *1900* and *The Last Emperor*, and a screenwriting workshop with Robert

Mr. Magder lives with his wife and six children in Atlantic Beach, New York.

Towne, who wrote classics such as *Chinatown*, *Shampoo* and *Mission: Impossible*. I had just turned eighteen, was living in Brentwood, and spent my days writing movie scripts on Malibu Beach and my evenings attending classes.

I felt very lucky. So many of my high school friends ended up having little say in determining their career paths. Their parents made the decision for them. One friend who had wanted to be an actor was off to medical school, another who wanted to study philosophy was en route to becoming a CPA. Ever since I was a young child, I knew what I wanted to do—join the family business.

My father had built one of the

largest motion picture entertainment companies in Canada. Based in Toronto, Magder Studios was home to some of the biggest productions including *Suspect*, starring Cher and Dennis Quaid; *The Freshman*, starring Marlon Brando and Mathew Broderick, and *Stanley & Iris*, starring Jane Fonda and Robert DeNiro. I regularly hung out with John Candy and the cast of *SCTV*. There was a constant flow of movie and rock stars coming through our doors. I was living a life that was the envy of all my friends.

After my stint in Los Angeles, I returned to Toronto and began working—reading lots of scripts sent in by aspiring screenwriters from around the continent. Sometimes I would find a

script that was poorly written but had a great plot. Other times the script would be extremely well written but the plot would be lame. As one of my film teachers taught me, “If you’re not completely engaged by page ten, no point in reading further. Toss it in the garbage.”

The industry is so competitive. Whenever I had to reject a script, which was most often the case, I always thought about the unfortunate writer who had probably invested a good part of his life into this project, convinced that he was destined to be the next Spielberg.

Fame is an interesting thing. Because society equates fame with

with the coffee boy or the grips. Not what you’d expect from the most powerful person on the set. But it was with the crew that he was most comfortable.

Over the years, my father received many offers to move his company to Los Angeles. I didn’t find out until I was much older that as lucrative as these offers were, my parents felt that Hollywood was not a wholesome place to raise their three boys. My parents always emphasized that there was more to life than the glamour and glitz of the movie business. They always regarded the business as just that—a business, not a way of life.

Most of our extended family had

aside from the gifts, was the pleasure of knowing that we wouldn’t have to attend Hebrew school again for the rest of our lives.

The religious atmosphere in our home began to change in 1977, the year that Anwar Sadat, the late president of Egypt, made his historic visit to Israel. What seemed to overshadow Sadat’s visit was that of two other individuals—my older brothers. Murray and Gary had spent several weeks in Ireland shooting a television documentary. Since they had never been to Israel, on their way home, they decided to stop by. While at the Kotel, they were approached by Rabbi Meir Shuster, a veritable legend who is responsible for bringing thousands of wayward Jews back to Judaism. He spends hours every day at the Kotel approaching Jewish kids who seem spiritually lost. He met my brothers, and asked them a few of his usual questions: “Are you Jewish?” “Do you know what Shabbat is?” “Have you ever seen a yeshivah before?” Ten minutes later, they were sitting in the office of Rabbi Noach Weinberg, *rosh yeshivah* of Aish HaTorah, then a fledgling school for newcomers to Orthodox Judaism. After spending a half hour



*The Magder brothers on the 2005 set of *Passover with the Wellmans*. From left to right: Rick, Mashe, Gary.*

power and importance, most wannabe screenwriters, filmmakers or actors will sell their souls or their firstborns to get into the business. I didn’t realize it at the time but I had bigger plans for my soul.

For someone who ran the largest studio in Canada, my father was (and still is) the most humble man I know. I used to give him a hard time because instead of dining with the stars or the director during lunch breaks on the set, he could always be found schmoozing

perished in the Holocaust. The most important thing to my parents, especially to my mother, was that their three sons stay close. Although we weren’t raised in a religious home, we felt a sense of pride in our Judaism. Dating a non-Jew, for example, was out of the question. Like most kids growing up in a Conservative home, my brothers and I attended Hebrew school once a week until we celebrated our Bar Mitzvahs. Like most of our friends, to us the best thing about becoming a Bar Mitzvah,

with the rabbi, they decided to check in for an extended stay, joining the fifteen college-age men who made up the entire student body at the time. After a couple of weeks Murray came home to finish the documentary while Gary stayed on, eager to soak up the wisdom of the Torah.

Back home, my parents were receiving regular calls from friends advising them to get on a plane to get Gary out of the “cult.” My parents, however, were happy: Gary was learning about Judaism. Unlike many of

their peers, my parents didn't see Judaism as an archaic set of laws that has little relevance. Their friends persisted. They told them that Gary was never going to come back. After six weeks in yeshivah, Gary called home, asking if he could stay indefinitely. After agonizing over the decision, my parents told him he had to come home. He did so reluctantly.

Over the next few years, I developed a connection to Aish through Gary's continued involvement. (Aish's first branch outside of Israel was in Toronto.) During this period, Gary encouraged several of his friends to "check out" Judaism in Israel. (Today, many of them are rabbis.) One of Gary's friends was studying to become an architect; another was in the process of building a successful career in the music

A young Rick on the set with actor Lorne Greene.

At the Seder I realized that if I can't read Hebrew, there was a good chance that my grandchildren might, God forbid, end up being the son in the Haggadah who didn't even know how to ask a question.

Around that time, I also came across a fascinating article in *Rolling Stone* by the now-famous writer Ellen Willis. In the article, Willis told the story of her non-observant brother who had checked into Aish HaTorah. She



industry. They both abandoned their professional studies to learn Torah. I thought these guys were crazy. This yeshivah thing made no sense. I had heard that there was no hot water for most of the day, and the food was pretty bad. I kept thinking of the *Twilight Zone* episode where people check into a hotel and never get out because the elevator takes them on a journey into the Twilight Zone.

It was our tradition at the Seder to go around the table and have everyone take a turn reading a section of the Haggadah out loud. Although we read the verses in English, I kept glancing at the Hebrew on the opposite page. One year—it couldn't have been more than five years since my Bar Mitzvah—I recall being shaken by the fact that I could barely read the Hebrew anymore. The realization marked the turning point in my thinking. Upon returning home from Israel, Gary had asked a poignant question: "How do you know you're Jewish? When can you guarantee that your grandchildren will be Jewish?"

went to "save" him. Well, you probably know the ending. He didn't come home, and while she herself did not embrace Orthodoxy, she painted this age-old religion in a very positive light. While the article moved me, I still wasn't entirely convinced. What could be so enthralling about studying Torah all day? I decided to check it out.

I signed up for the very first Aish HaTorah Jerusalem Fellowships, a summer program that primarily attracted Ivy Leaguers who saw it as a cheap summer vacation. Okay, we all thought, so we will have to put up with a few classes on Judaism. At least, we can spend time at the beach. At the orientation on the first day, one guy stood up and started screaming, "You think you're going to brainwash us? We are intelligent people. You're not going to pull one over on me!" He ended up staying at Aish for a few years, ultimately becoming a rabbi.

Up until that point, to me Judaism had been about attending synagogue a few times a year where you stood up and sat down and then stood

up again while listening to some guy wearing a big hat and a robe sing opera.

At yeshivah, I quickly discovered that Judaism is more than a set of dry laws. It is, as Rabbi Weinberg says, "instructions for living." When you buy a car or a watch, it comes with an instruction book. Instructions for living. What a concept! Judaism teaches one how to live a meaningful life. We studied topics that were never discussed in school. As the *rosh yeshivah* explained, school gives you knowledge, the Torah gives you wisdom. We talked about building meaningful relationships, respecting our parents, maximizing our potential and our responsibilities to the world and to those around us.

"Don't take anything you learn here for granted," my teachers would say. "Ask questions." Anytime I wanted to leave, the door was open. What kind of cult tells you to leave whenever you want?

I remember sitting one night with the Harvard and Yale students with whom I shared a room. We looked at one other knowing what the other was thinking. Most of us came on the trip thinking it would be an inexpensive summer vacation. We were not anticipating undergoing any major life change. Yet here we were presented with overwhelming proof that God exists and that He created the world. He gave us each a set of tools to keep it running and make it a better place. It was as if we were handed a set of keys to the universe and given a mission. It was a gift just for us.

One could easily go through life, unthinkingly, content having a fulfilling career, a beautiful home and a wonderful family life. Suddenly, these goals no longer seemed to be enough. It was mind-boggling to think that we had lived our lives for twenty-some years without ever contemplating any of this.

I started to feel conflicted. The goals I previously had no longer seemed important. Movies? Entertainment? Art? How could there be any value in that?

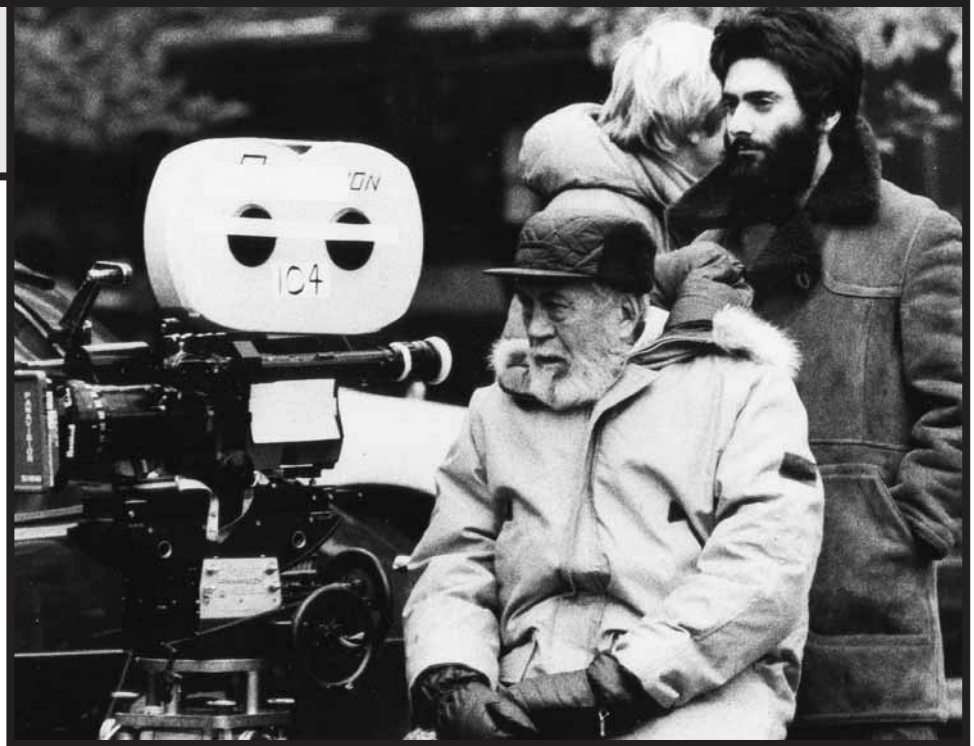
Legendary director John Huston with cameraman Murray on the set of *Phobia* (1980), a Magder production.

All this time I had been investing meaning into something that now seemed inherently meaningless. I shared my confusion with one of the rabbis. He explained to me that God gives us unique talents and abilities. Our challenge is to channel them in a meaningful way. I began to view things differently. With film you can change the world. With film you can affect people's emotions. Make them think, feel and believe anything. All of a sudden I was overcome by a deep feeling of responsibility. I was given command of a powerful tool. I could use whatever talent I have for my own personal benefit or I could use it to do something meaningful and purposeful.

I returned from the Fellowships a changed person. I had grown significantly, and I made a commitment to continue learning. I made an effort to keep Shabbat. I started wearing *tzitzit*. I stopped eating out at non-kosher restaurants. At every turn, I faced a new challenge. How do I integrate a Torah-observant lifestyle into my work? The first big test was covering my head. The good thing about working in the arts is that I could walk into a meeting of executives wearing a suit, a tie and a baseball cap and they would think nothing of it. They were sure that it was part of the "creative" uniform.

It was only a few weeks after my return from Israel that I received a call from a producer in New York. Would I produce a show for the Playboy Channel? It was the only time I ever received such a request. God does have a sense of humor. Was this a test? The money was great. I turned it down.

I worked on many different projects and continued to encounter all kinds of interesting personalities. There was the famous actress who specified in her contract her need for a particular type of padded toilet seat. There was the



actor who kicked in a desk because he was told not to charge his lunches to my father's tab. The stories are endless. I began feeling sorry for these people. What lengths they would go just so that they could feel important! And, it seemed to me that with all the fame and fortune, actors are the loneliest and most depressed people on earth. It's all about being loved by a fickle public that really doesn't care about you. It must be very hard living your life not knowing if your current film will be your last. After all, the public may no longer love you a year from now.

Around that time my father was producing a movie starring the legendary Orson Welles. When Orson would exit his dressing room you would often hear his bellowing voice from across the studio: "Anyone who doesn't have to be here, GET OUT! You're taking up my valuable oxygen." He intimidated everyone on the set. Everyone, except my father. When Orson was on the set, my father, wanting to teach him a lesson, refused to show up. After several days of this kind of treatment, Orson couldn't take it any longer. He sent many letters to my father begging him to forgive him, telling him how much he admired and respected him.

My father would send messages back telling him that he had to behave differently. One evening my father got a frantic call.

"Mr. Magder, you have to come to the hotel right away."

"What's wrong?" my father asked, concerned.

"Orson is supposed to be attending a press conference now. There are dozens of reporters here, and he said that he won't go into the room unless you are sitting beside him."

My father rushed down to the hotel and found Orson waiting for him. You could see the relief on Orson's face. Together they entered the conference room. Orson didn't want to answer questions about *Citizen Kane* or *The War of the Worlds*. He wanted to talk about the greatest producer he had ever worked with: Zale Magder. My father felt such pity for this man. Once the greatest and most powerful force in Hollywood, Orson had become a most insecure human being.

Shortly after I returned from Israel, *Lifestyles* magazine ran a feature article about my brothers and me, calling us the most eligible bachelors in Canada. Murray was directing his first feature film—*The Galucci Brothers* star-

ring Tony Sirico of *The Sopranos*. The film proved to be very challenging. There was one very positive outcome, however—Murray went back to Israel and checked into Aish HaTorah for a year to “detox.” He ended up spending another year in Ohr Somayach in Monsey, New York. Now he’s Moshe and lives with his wife and four kids in Passaic, New Jersey.

Studying Torah gave me a much better appreciation of my parents and the values they instilled in us. So much of what they taught us was Torah. We just didn’t know it at the time.

By the mid-nineties, I had shifted my energies from focusing on commercial productions to working on Jewish- and education-related productions. One such project was a magazine-style show for television I developed to teach teenagers about Judaism. I pitched it to a new cable network with programming that focused on faith and family values. After several meetings, the president of the network gave it a green light. In our last meeting he told me that he had hired a new programming director who would be starting in a few days. He mentioned that she was Jewish and that she was going to love this project. As soon as I heard that, I knew it was a death sentence. The meeting went as I expected: she felt the show was “too Jewish.” “Why would anybody be interested in Shabbat?” she asked. Her only recollection of Shabbat was her exhausted grandmother peeling potatoes all Friday. “Why don’t you have any female rabbis in here?” she asked me. She nixed the show. Subsequently, I brought the idea to Rabbi Raphael Butler, the executive vice president of the Orthodox Union at the time. He invited me to work with the OU in developing creative educational projects for the broader community and offered to provide me with an in-house production facility. That coupled with the fact that Rabbi Butler subsequently introduced me to my wife made it hard to say no.

As the saying goes, the rest is history. As the director of the OU Department of Media and Broadcasting, I’ve been involved with

many interesting projects including producing *The Prince of Egypt Hagaddah*, in conjunction with Dreamworks SKG, creating *Tinker Shop Tales*, an animated show based on the Tower of Babel story for children, and developing various documentaries on Jewish personalities and history. I’ve interviewed politicians including Hillary Clinton, Ted Kennedy, Presidents Ford and Carter, to name a few. Currently, I’m helping to reshape the direction of the OU on the web, where we are reaching tens of thousands of people from all over the world. Along with my team, I’ve created ouradio.org, an online radio station streaming music, *shiurim* and original programs twenty-four hours a day. On ouradio.org, I have my very own podcast show, *Off the Beaten Path*, where I interview Jewish personalities from all over the world who are contributing to the community in fascinating ways. I’m continuing to develop innovative and inspiring video and audio content. It’s exciting to be involved in this kind of work especially in this new age of technology. The convergence of video and audio media and the Internet has opened up possibilities to educate and inspire in ways that were never possible before. We receive e-mails from people around the globe whose only connection to Judaism is the content that we provide for them on the web. This past Tishah B’Av, for example, we produced our annual webcast of Rabbi Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, the executive vice president of the OU, providing insight into some of the *kinot*. The four-plus-hour event was broadcast live from a shul in Teaneck, New Jersey. Thousands of viewers from around the world logged on, including Jews from China, New Zealand, Holland, Australia, Malta, Italy, England, South Africa and South America. Subsequently, we received an email from someone in the southern part of the US who thanked us for the broadcast saying that he hadn’t been to a synagogue in nearly a decade because the closest one to him was a ten-hour drive.

Pirkei Avot teaches us the importance of having a good name. It doesn’t

say anything about the name ending up in lights or on an autograph pad. I believe that when we feel that we have a sense of purpose and are able to make a contribution that can change people’s lives for the better, we are truly alive.

I recall a conversation I had with my father when, as a teenager, I accompanied him to London to record a movie score with the Royal Philharmonic of England. I will never forget my father’s words—simple and to the point. “You only get one chance in this life. Make it count and always be kind to others.” Judaism teaches just that. Each of us has an opportunity to make our lives meaningful. We have to use whatever resources we are given to accomplish that goal. Are we going to make our lives count or are we going to miss the boat?

My father, now retired from the movie industry, often comments that perhaps the real reason he had to go into the entertainment business was for the sole purpose of enabling his sons, all of whom are involved in Jewish media, to use their talents and creativity for Klal Yisrael.

Today, when I sit at my Shabbat table and bless each of my six beautiful children and listen to them share words of Torah, I recall my father’s words to me. I thank Hashem, my parents and my wife for all the blessings that I have received, and I am eternally grateful to all those individuals who helped me along my journey to make my life “really count.” **JA**

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