

*Excerpt taken from “Living Memory” by Chaim Herzog, Pantheon Books, 1996, pages 128-129. Reprinted with permission of Isaac Herzog*

Fear of anti-Semitism led many American Jews into the closet. While visiting the Naval Bureau of Ships on a purchasing mission, I was received by Admiral Louis Dreller, one of the navy’s top engineers. When I told him that I observed the traditional Friday night service at home, a sad look overcame him. Since he had been in the navy he had not experienced such an evening. He had grown up in New England in a traditional Jewish family and even donned tefillin and phylacteries, ate kosher and married a Jewish woman. But when he was appointed to Annapolis, he decided that the innate anti-Semitism that pervaded the armed forces would never let him advance—certainly not to a flag rank—if it was known that he was Jewish. His exposure to Israel through our meeting made him realize that he had to admit his origins. He could no longer stand the pretense. “Would you invite my wife and myself?” he asked.

A particularly moving story was that of Brigadier General Robert Ginsburgh. He was a special assistant to General George Marshall, the secretary of defense, and was an absolutely brilliant man. He was married to the non-Jewish daughter of an admiral and was very much part of the senior military officers’ “establishment.” We invited the couple to our home, and Mrs. Ginsbergh said to her husband, “Bob, show them how good you are at Hebrew.” He thereupon removed a tractate of the Talmud from the shelf and began, with the inevitable singsong of Talmudic study, to read the text and to elaborate on it. It turned out he was the son of a *shochet* in Rochester, New York. He had abandoned Judaism, although he refused to change his last name, which revealed his origin and thereby prevented his advance to higher rank. He had gone so far away from Judaism that he was actually a dignitary in the local evangelical congregation. Yet he seemed to be drawn, as if by a magnet, to things Jewish in our home.

On the first occasion that the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra visited Washington and played in Constitution Hall, I invited Admiral and Mrs. Dreller and General and Mrs. Ginsbergh to be our guests. President Harry Truman graced the occasion with his presence, together with a galaxy of personalities, the cream of Washington. The orchestra opened this magnificent evening with the playing of the American and Israeli national anthems. Suddenly, in the midst of the playing of “Hatikvah,” our national anthem, both Aura and I noticed that General Ginsbergh was beginning to sway. He became as white as a sheet and was obviously about to collapse from emotion. We held his arms and kept him upright until the end of the anthem. Here, perhaps more than anywhere else I’ve ever been, I saw the unbroken cord of Jewish identity coming to expression, and the tragedy of someone who had cut the cord.

After Marshall resigned and James Forrestal became the secretary of defense, Bob Ginsbergh lost his standing, and retired from the armed forces to become military analyst for *U.S. News & World Report*. On a trip with other military correspondents, he was killed when the plane crashed. When on home leave, I related the story of General Ginsbergh to my father. To my surprise, he had known General Ginsbergh’s father, and he said to me, “The general you knew was a sixth-generation descendent of the Sha’agat Arye, one of the greatest rabbinical commentators and scholars of the nineteenth century.”