

Kol Rinah's Adventurous *Baal Koreh* Learned Torah Early and Well, and Ended Up Writing Speeding Tickets

By Repps Hudson



Marvin Lerner, who's retired from his usual place on the *bimah* as *baal koreh*, isn't sure what he'll do for his next act.

For 37 years, Lerner's task has been to read the appropriate Torah section for each week, so the entire Torah would be heard in services each year.

You may have missed him, since he was always there on the *bimah* and after a few Shabbats could have been taken for granted.

But when members of the congregation had an *aliya* to read from the Torah, Lerner would be there to make sure the reader got it right, as well as to read parts that others did not read.

Even though he'd been through the entire text repeatedly for nearly 40 years, Lerner said he usually spends about four hours each week going over the week's *parsha* to understand it better and ensure he will pronounce each word correctly.

Reading Torah is challenging because there are no vowels and no punctuation in the Hebrew text.

Lerner's done many things in his 82 years, and not all of them has centered on his extensive knowledge of Torah and Judaism.

We talked about his various adventures in Judaism and the secular world in a recent interview at Kol Rinah as workmen noisily worked on the construction of the Early Childhood Center.

"I've done a lot of things in my life," Lerner said, adding that these days, he sells insurance, as he has for several years, and that he's "semi-retired."

From 1962 to 1968, Lerner taught earth science to junior high students in the Pattonville School District, after earning a bachelor's degree from Harris Teachers College and finishing a master's in geology at Webster University.

For many years, Lerner also taught afternoon Hebrew school for the Board of Jewish Education, which provided classes for synagogues around St. Louis.

He grew up in west St. Louis city on Clara Avenue, near Easton Avenue, now Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, with two brothers and a sister. He spent a lot of time at Council House, which many years later, he said, became part of the Jewish Community Center.

For Lerner as he was growing up, Council House was the focus of his Jewish education.

"The neighborhood was primarily Jewish," he said. "Lot of Catholics, lot of Jews. A good place to grow up, actually... All of us were poor, but we had three meals a day. I don't know how my mom did it."

His orthodox *shul* was Nusach Hari B'nai Zion, now, two buildings later, on Price Road in Olivette.

The rabbi was Sholom Rivkin, who later became chief rabbi of St. Louis – the area’s last. Rivkin, who was born in Jerusalem, spotted in young Marvin Lerner a talent for reading Torah.

“For my bar mitzvah, he wanted me to read an entire Torah portion, which I did,” Lerner said. “I’d walk over to his house once or twice a week and study... By the time I turned 13, I did an entire Torah portion...,” which was unusual for a boy of that age.

He chanted the *Vayechi*, the final four chapters of Genesis, about 85 or 90 sentences, he said.

A few months after his bar mitzvah, Rivkin talked Lerner’s parents into sending him to a *yeshiva* in Chicago, the Chicago Jewish Academy on the west side, where he studied as a high school student from 1952 until 1956.

That meant religious studies in the mornings and secular studies in the afternoon.

A young teen-ager at the *yeshiva*, Lerner lived in a dormitory far from his home. His parents were able to afford to send him to the Jewish academy, he said, because “we didn’t take vacations. We didn’t have expensive cars. We lived in a very modest neighborhood, and I must have gotten a very large scholarship to be able to attend the *yeshiva*.”

When he began his studies, he knew how to read Torah, but he said he was “way behind” in Hebrew language and general Jewish studies. Some of his instructors wanted him to study to become a rabbi, but he turned that down in favor of teaching.

At the academy, he also lettered three years in baseball and was a switch hitter.

When he returned to St. Louis, Lerner enrolled in the junior division of Harris Teachers College (now part of Harris-Stowe State University) to begin his studies to become a public-school teacher.

As graduation approached, Lerner said, he discovered he was 12 hours short of his degree. The head of the German department, also Jewish, helped him earn 12 hours credit because Lerner knew the Torah well.

The professor had him sit in the back of a German class and write – from memory -- in a Blue Book certain sections from the Torah. He did that flawlessly, and for that the department chairman credited him with enough hours to graduate and begin his teaching career in a public school.

About 20 years ago, Lerner noticed he was paying “a fortune” -- about \$1,500 a month -- for health insurance for his wife, Dorrie (nee Doris Fox) and himself.

He figured he needed to find a job that had good benefits, so he took a job driving a school bus in the Parkway School District to take advantage of the low-cost health insurance for teachers and district employees.

“I loved it,” he said. “The last couple of years, I drove athletic field trips. That was like taking candy from a baby...”

“I had the same insurance policy as the superintendent of schools,” he said. “My cost was free. My wife’s cost was \$200 a month.”

Years ago, Lerner figured out that he could satisfy his curiosity about law enforcement by becoming a reserve officer for the St. Louis County Police Department.

He graduated from the police academy and, after a few years of wearing the county uniform, he joined the Maryland Heights force as a reservist, which meant he filled in and did the same police work as full-time officers.

He spent more than 20 years as a reserve police officer in the two departments.

“I wrote a lot of speeding tickets,” Lerner said.