

From All Men

By Michael Fine

© Michael Fine 2019

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

When Arthur Rubinow, the shamesh, the haysedonda of the Meeting Street Shul, counted the people in his mind, he found only six. Eight for Mincha/Maariv today. Six for shacharit tomorrow. A minyan is ten. Ten men, once. Ten anyone, now. Ten Jews. He needed ten Jews to have a real service, ten people so that people saying Kaddish could mourn their dead correctly, with memory, honor and dignity, sing G-d's praises, read Torah, pray, and learn together.

They were a dwindling community, but they were a community nonetheless. Once upon a time, not so very long ago, their early morning minyan was warm and vibrant. They davened in a chapel in the basement of the synagogue, a moldy place made of dark wood that faced east, which had stained glass windows that depicted blue and green leaves and kept out the light. Thirty men, even in the middle of summer, when families went to their beach houses for weeks at a time. Ten or fifteen women, who sat in benches off to one side. There was never a wall or even a curtain between the men and the women. They were not a community that needed a wall. People just knew where to sit, and everyone respected everyone else.

Before, most of the men had come from Europe, most from before and some after the war. They worked in or ran businesses: a candy factory owner, a furrier, a dry cleaner, a junk dealer whose children would call him a recycler of used building material after they got into real estate, a furniture store owner, a couple of sales clerks, a jeweler or two, a rug dealer, and the owner of a small dry-goods store who had started as a peddler walking from place to place, carrying his wares on his back. The Hebrew teachers and the Jewish community people, the functionaries who ran the federation and the JCC and HIAS and the Hebrew Free Loan fund, they came as well, but less often than you might think, because by and large they were American

born, and didn't feel the pain of history and the sadness of unrequited longing in their souls, the way the generation who had been born in the shtetl or in Warsaw or Buda-pest or Bucharest or Prague did.

Their children, the second generation, the doctors and lawyers and engineers, were different. Some came as children and continued to come, in smaller and smaller numbers, after they grew up, but most didn't come at all. That generation didn't really know how to daven even though they could read the words. They used Sephardic trope even though their families were from Eastern Europe because that was the way Hebrew was spoken now, in what Arthur Rubinow always called the new state of Israel even after it was 60 years old, which he prayed for with his heart and soul but never entirely believed could survive. The second generation came because their fathers came, out of respect and a little fear, the ones who were given to respect and fear, though many of that generation and most of the generation which came after them ran wild in the streets.

That older generation, the generation of immigrants, they really knew. They knew Torah, they knew Talmud, they knew how to daven, to pray with their whole souls, and they had sachel, wisdom. They listened before speaking and they turned a problem or idea over in their minds, thinking out all the ramifications before answering a question or stating their beliefs. More often than not, they answered a question with a question. Who is a fool? He who knows not and knows not he knows not. Who is wise, the Pirkei Avot asks? And answers: he who learns from all men.

When the minyan was at its height, the Chapel would be full twice a day and sometimes the late-comers, the people who lived in the suburbs and arrived a few minutes late or the men

who stayed at business a little too long in the late afternoon would have to stand in the back. The late-comers had to use cast off siddurim, the old prayer books which had different page numbers and worn covers. Each of the regulars had a seat, of course, and every man knew who would lead which part of the service at which time and on what day. On Mondays and Thursdays, when they read Torah, everyone knew who would get the first five aliyahs, and everyone knew that the last two, before and after the mishaberha, the blessing for the sick, were reserved for guests or newcomers, so even the young men, who often came trailed by a son or a boy and girl of four and six, had a job to do and a place in the community and so felt included and respected. Each man shook the hand of every other man after their part or after an aliyah, so by the time the davening was finished, every man had shaken the hand of every other man in the community ten or even twenty times. Yes, just the men. That was normal. Part of daily life, something no one even noticed or questioned but which happened every single day of the year nonetheless.

But then generation from Europe began to die out. The doctors and lawyers and accountants came, but only once or twice a week, or only on shabbos, or only mornings or only evenings and gradually not at all. The minyan thinned. There was a moment in the late seventies and eighties when the Russians arrived and it looked like the minyan might grow strong again. But the Russians didn't last. Their old men knew how to read but they didn't know Torah and Talmud, they didn't daven with their souls the way the old men born in Eastern Europe did, and they didn't mix much with the rest of the minyan. The old Russian men died off quickly, and their second generation didn't come at all. Their second generation gave Arthur Rubinow a little hope at first but quickly dissolved into America. They stuck together, and had big family dinners at a Russian restaurant in Brookline, but they didn't join the community itself. Then they didn't come to daven, and didn't come to say Kaddish when the old people died and

didn't even come back once a year for yahrzeits, to say kaddish on the Hebrew calendar anniversary of a loved one's death like the children and grandchildren of the shtetl and the Holocaust did.

The minyan felt the loss of each man, of each person, the loss of the men who knew and their wives who came with them and sat on the benches off to the side. Each loss left a gap, a hole that could be felt and even seen, a lost tooth, because everyone in the minyan knew the voices of every other person, knew the way they would sing a certain part. What had been a robust and guttural chorus when the minyan sang or spoke the shema or the borachu or words or lines of the kaddish together became a few voices, singing alone together, the women's voices clearly heard now, and sweet, because most of the few women could at least carry a tune.

Sometimes only fifteen or twenty men came. Then only twelve or thirteen. Many seats went unfilled. The chapel was renovated, and moved from the basement to the top of a flight of stairs, facing south, not east, so the sun streamed through the windows at sunset in winter, and the old dark wooden benches were replaced by blond wood chairs with nice upholstery.

They coped. First the shamash and the gabbai were replaced by men who were American born. Then they started counting women to make the minyan, as the need for ten men became the need for ten people. Then women had aliyahs and then women read from the Torah and then a woman became the gabbai. Who knew?

But despite all the change, the minyan shrank. Some days they waited fifteen or twenty minutes for a minyan. Some days thirty minutes. Some days an hour. Some days Arthur Rubinow called his friend Morty to come over to make ten. Some days he asked his wife Diane. They thought about and discussed opening the ark, and counting the Holy Presence to help them

get to ten people, as they did in some of the tiny communities in Galacia and Georgia, but then their Rabbi ruled against such a practice. There were enough Jews in the community to make a minyah. So the responsibility was to find more people to come. Was minyan attendance also the responsibility of the Holy One, Blessed be he? No! It was the responsibility of the community! But then the Rabbi himself didn't come any more, so what sense did any of it make?

Some days they didn't get ten people at all, and so mourners couldn't say Kaddish, they couldn't read Torah, and they couldn't recite the shemoneh esrei out loud or say the Kaddusha at all.

There was a new minyan of hippies who met in the chapel on shabbos after the early morning minyan was over, and the two groups met on the stairs or coming through the doors. The men had long hair and the women had tattoos and piercings, like Cannanite harlots or the Moabite ritual prostitutes described in Bereshit. They drummed and played guitars. Young people. But at least they came to shul.

Now everything was different. Women rabbis. Cantors who were converts. Gay people and lesbians and people who went from one gender to the other and back. There were people of color in that minyan. Chinese people and people from India and Africa, people whose skin was as black as charcoal. The world had changed. The people of the early morning minyan barely recognized the new world they were in.

One shabbos in early summer, when some of the regulars were at the beach, when the sun was very strong even though it was early, only five people were sitting in the seats and only eight all together were coming. Two women. Three men. Five. Better than nothing. Still, Arthur

Rubinow announced the page, and David Weinstein, a retired dentist, began the preliminary prayers. Everyone understood that Kaddish D'Rabbanan would be left out. People would trickle in, and some of those parts could be added back at the end of the service, once they got to ten. If they got to ten. If a miracle happened.

But Arthur Rubinow had already counted in his mind, and he knew a minyan was impossible. Diane Berkovits was at the beach. The Golds were visiting their son and new daughter-in-law in Bethesda. The Aroniwitzes were in the Berkshires. Arthur Kaplan had just had foot surgery and couldn't walk yet. Arthur Rubinow had made his phone calls the evening before, and he knew what he knew. Eight. With luck they might get eight. But no more. The world was full of Jews but no more than eight Jews in the whole city were available to pray together, read Torah and sing G-d's praises that day in late June.

The door lock buzzed. There were footsteps on the stairs. Penelope Yellin came in and took her usual seat, so now they were six. They did not say Borachu but they read the Shema out loud together. If you can say the Shema out loud when you are davening alone then you can certainly say it out loud when you are davening with only six people.

Arthur Rubinow closed his eyes, and went out into the hallway where he could use his cellphone without being seen. Pikuach nefesh. It is permissible to break all rules in order to preserve life. Wasn't a minyan life itself? He texted Morty and Diane. Diane texted back. She was getting out of bed and would drive over. That would make seven. Jeffery Sussman, their Gabbai, would arrive right at 8:17 as he did every shabbos, just in time for the Torah reading. He was a lawyer and acted like the rules that applied to everyone else didn't apply to him. But he came every week, and that was enough for them. They might get to eight. But no more. Ten

was impossible, at least this week. They would cope, they would go on living, and, G-d willing, they would have a minyan again shabbos the following week when people returned from their travels.

But a little part of Arthur Rubinow felt shame nonetheless. They were a community, and as a community they had failed to keep this small promise to themselves. He was a man, and he had failed to find ten people, in a world that was full of people, in a world that had once been full of men who wanted only to stand together, to sing G-d' praises, to remember, to give to charity, to do good deeds, and to carry on. Now there was almost nothing left. He had been delaying the inevitable. And was unable to admit the truth. There just weren't enough people for a minyan anymore. He lived in a lost world.

They were ready to read the first Amidah. Waiting for more people wasn't going to change anything. The Amidah would have to be said silently, without the Kiddusha. Arthur Rubinow stood to announce the page.

But when Arthur Rubinow opened his mouth, a siren came out instead of words. An earsplitting, brilliantly painful, too loud to think siren. WHHOP WHHOP WHHOP WHHOP. Who makes noises like this on shabbos? For a moment, Arthur Rubinow wondered if he was having a stroke, and perhaps the siren was only in his brain. But the other people looked around, put down their siddurim, their prayer books, took off their tallasim, folded them, put them on their seats, and marched toward the doors. The siren was a fire alarm and it was loud

Arthur Rubinow followed the little group out the door, climbed down the stairs, and left the building.

Three fire trucks pulled up in front of the shul, their red and white lights bathing the streets. Two police cars arrived, adding blue and white lights to the red and white lights washing the buildings and the cars. The street smelled like diesel exhaust, though there was still a hint of the sweet green taste of late spring because of all the flowers and trees that were in bloom in the plantings and from the trees planted next to the street.

Teams of fire fighters went into the building. The six people from the minyan clustered on the sidewalk in front of the stoop. The men still all wore kippas and the women wore white lace dollies pinned to their hair, but the little knot of people standing together looked somehow out of place, six Jews in nice clothing standing together on a bright June morning, as firemen with red fire hats and yellow rubber fireman's boots stood in front of their trucks, trotted back and forth to the shul, or prowled inside the synagogue.

"I didn't smell smoke," Paulline Yellin said.

"Was my davening that bad that it set off the fire alarm?" David Weinstein asked.

Diane walked down the sidewalk and joined them. Jeffery Sussman arrived. Now they were eight. Eight Jews on a sidewalk. Too few and with no place to go.

The firemen walked in and out. A team of three, carrying an oxygen tank, came out of the building. Better they are coming out than rushing in with hoses, Arthur Rubinow thought. In a real fire we would need to go in ourselves to rescue and protect the Torahs. Six torahs in the chapel alone. Many more in the main sanctuary and the vault.

More firemen came out.

The fire trucks turned off their flashing lights. Then the police cars drove away.

False alarm, Arthur Rubinow thought. We'll go in soon and finish. Only eight of us. No Torah reading. We'll finish fast.

"How long do we wait?" David Weinstein said.

Arthur Rubinow approached a group of fire fighters who stood in front of the first truck, killing time. Two smoked cigarettes.

"Gentleman, are we free to return to the building?" he said. "Fire, or false alarm?"

"No false alarms, only tests of systems integrity," one of the firefighters said. His hat was under his arm. He had a ruddy complexion, a thinning hairline, and a bushy moustache.

"No fire. If there was a fire we wouldn't be standing here, blowing smoke," said a second fire fighter, who was tall, dark skinned and powerfully built.

"Ya gotta wait for the Fire Marshall to sing," said a young one, who was fair and pale, had close cropped red hair and green eyes, who was slight but had big shoulders and blue and green tattoos that flowed over his arms and neck. "They check carefully. I think he's almost done. Hey, Shabbat Shalom, Mr. Rubinow, it's Neil Green."

Arthur Rubinow took half a step backward. Neil Green was a little boy, a mischief maker, a pipsqueak, who came to shul only once in a blue moon, when his divorced father, an animator for a film studio, was in town and came to say Kaddish. The mother was a teacher and was Portuguese. She had converted when the kid was born, but lost interest as soon as the father

moved out. Neil Green. He was always a kid Arthur Rubinow gave candy to when he came, so his memories of Torah would always be sweet. Who knew?

“No hurry,” Arthur Rubinow said. “We’re only eight. We’ll be done in five minutes.”

Two men in orange hats came out of a side door. They were older guys, in their forties or early fifties, ruddy faced and beefy.

“All clear,” one of them said. “You can go back now.”

We’ll have to hurry, Arthur Rubinow thought. We started twenty minutes late. We davened for ten or fifteen minutes before the fire alarm and have been twenty or thirty minutes outside. The hippies with their drumming will be here before long. Start on Page 115. It shouldn’t take us long.

The others were starting to go inside.

A young man wearing a kippah and carrying a talis bag walked toward the shul. Or perhaps it was not a young man. The person walking had long hair that was held in place by a hair-band, and glasses, and wore a white shirt and trousers. One of the hippies coming to drum, a little early.

“Shabbat Shalom,” the person said, and held the door for Arthur Rubinow.

“Shabbat Shalom,” Arthur Rubinow replied. “Can you daven with us? We don’t have a minyan yet. We’ll be done in ten minutes.”

“Of course,” the person said.

They walked up the stairs together, both of them. One more person. A little closer to a minyah, and perhaps a little closer to G-d.

Then the buzzer went off. Someone was at the locked door.

It was one of the fireman. Neil Green.

Arthur Rubinow went down the stairs to let him in.

“I can stay until we get another call,” Neil Green said. “The boys on the truck’ll wait. Capt’n’s good with it.”

Arthur Rubinow and Neil Green, this pipsqueak, now a man, also walked up the stairs together, also both of them.

They had ten. Ten including two people neither Arthur Rubinow nor any of the other regulars even knew existed. They were a community, however thrown together by happenstance, however worn out, accidental and ragtag, and together they could daven together, remember the past, mourn the dead, and learn.

The world had changed under their feet, while the people of the early morning minyan weren’t looking. Neither better nor worse. Just different. What is holy? G-d is holy. Kindness is holy. Justice is holy. Who is wise? He, and now she, and now they, who learn from all men. And women. And everything and everyone else in between.

Glossary

Aliyah – Literally, going up. Generally used to describe the honor of going to recite blessings before the reading of a portion of the Torah. There are generally eight such honors each time the Torah is read.

Amidah – Silent Prayer, the central prayer of Jewish liturgy, which usually consists of 18 blessings but the actual number said varies with time of day and day of the week. It is repeated at least three times a day during the week and four times on Saturday, and recited silently, standing up and facing east. When a minyan is present, it is usually repeated, chanted out loud by the person leading the service.

Bereshit – the Hebrew name of the book of Genesis.

Borachu – literally, blessing. A blessing repeated out loud early in each service, which functions as a call to prayer.

Daven—(verb) to pray.

Gabbai – the person who calls people to have the honor of saying blessings before the reading of the Torah.

Haysedonda -- yiddishized contraction for “Hey, sit down there” a joking description of the shamesh.

JCC – Jewish Community Center, usually a building which often had a gym and a swimming pool and meeting rooms for Jewish community organization, common in the larger Jewish Communities of the US.

Kaddish—a prayer about the holiness of G-d, repeated a number of times in each service, and said standing by those in morning and by people on the anniversary of the deaths of loved ones. The Mourner’s Kaddish can only be said when a minyan (ten men, or ten people, depending on the congregation) is present.

Kaddish D’Rabbanan – a version of the Kaddish than recognizes the importance of scholars, recited in Orthodox communities after a lecture on certain parts of Talmud, and in other communities as part of the morning service.

Kiddusha – a section of the Amidah (Silent Prayer) which is recited only when a minyan is present.

Kippa (s), *Kippas* (pl) – skull cap, yarmulka.

HIAS – Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, an organization that looked after new Jewish immigrants a hundred years ago and again after the Second World War and the Holocaust, and then again when large numbers of Russian immigrants came to the US, in the 1980s and 1990s, and which advocates effectively for immigrants from many places today.

Maariv-- the evening service, often combined with Mincha, the afternoon service

Mincha – the afternoon service.

Minyan—traditionally, the ten men required for a service that includes saying a number of important prayers out loud or at all and for reading the Torah. US conservative and reform congregations now count all people over thirteen or who have been bar or bat mitzvahed as constituting a minyan.

Mishaberha—(literally, blessing) used here to mean the blessing for the sick, which is said as part of the Torah service.

Pikuach nefesh—A principle of Jewish law derived from Torah and developed in the Talmud, that says other Jewish laws can be violated if doing so is necessary to save a life.

Pirkei Avot – *The Ethics of the Fathers*, the second to last book of the Talmud with one additional chapter, and deals only with ethical and moral principles.

Shema – A one line prayer that serves as the central coda of Judaism. “Hear O Israel the Lord our G-d, the Lord is One” is a rough translation. It is repeated at least twice a day, is said by children as a bedtime prayer, and observant Jews try to have it on their lips at the moment of their deaths.

Shemoneh esrei – the Amidah, or Silent Prayer.

Shul – Yiddish colloquialism for synagogue.

Sephardic trope – the sung pronunciation of the Torah read in Hebrew used by Jews descended from those who lived in Spain and Portugal, communities that moved to Holland, Greece, Turkey, Italy and North Africa after the Spanish Inquisition. That pronunciation used by Jews in Eastern Europe is called Ashkenazi trope.

Shabbat Shalom – tradition shabbos greeting, literally, greetings/peace on this Sabbath.

Shabbos – The Sabbath, the central organizing feature of Jewish life.

Shamesh -- traditionally, the warden or caretaker of the synagogue. Now used to describe the person who organizes a religious service. Originally and also the candle on a Hanukah menorah that is used to light all the other candles, which is the origin of the use of the word in synagogue life.

Shararit—the morning service

Shtetl – Small Yiddish speaking community in Eastern Europe. The villages where Jews lived, next to but other separate from their non Jewish neighbors.

Siddur – prayer book, singular Siddurim (plural)

Talmud – 63 complicated books of what was originally oral law that was transcribed to text, commentaries on that law and stories about the law and the (thousands of) rabbis who complied it over many centuries, all developed from the law set out in the Torah.

Tallasim (plural) *Talis*, singular, Askenazi; *Tallit*, singular, Sephardic – prayer shawl, worn on shabbos.

Torah – The five books of Moses, written by a trained scribe's hand on a sheepskin scroll, which is read out loud on Monday, Thursday and Saturday (Shabbos). There is considerable ceremony attached to the reading of the Torah, and a significant body of Jewish law laying out the way it is to be read. Once upon a time, the law was read in the marketplace: Monday and Thursday were market days.

Yahrzeit—the anniversary of the death of a close (parent child or spouse) loved one, when Kaddish is recited in the presence of a minyan.

All of Michael Fine's stories and books are available on MichaelFineMD.com or by clicking [here](#).
Join us!