

EAT, PRAY, NACHES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Waverley Council, NSW

MENDEL KASTEL: Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: Mendel Kastel

Interviewer: Ashley Roan

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Interviewer: We'll start off, if you could tell me your name and when and where you were born.

Mendel Kastel: My name is Mendel Kastel. I was born in Brooklyn, New York April 13th, 1968.

Interviewer: Can you tell me, basically, what was happening in the States and the circumstances that led up to you deciding to migrate to Australia?

Mendel Kastel: Growing up in New York I studied in the Chabad Yeshiva system. As I finished school there was an opportunity to be able to be chosen to study in different parts of the world, to be able to take the studies and what we've learned to actually teach others, and to bring the experiences, the programs, etcetera to different parts of the world. I was chosen to come to Sydney, Australia in 1988, and eventually settled here. That's when I first started here.

Interviewer: Hopefully that wasn't the short straw.

Mendel Kastel: No, I can't complain about Sydney. It's a great place.

Interviewer: Fantastic. Okay. A lot of these are fairly self-explanatory, aren't they? Is there any particular reason why you decided to settle in the local area?

Mendel Kastel: The school, the Yeshiva Centre was based in Bondi, and that's basically where we arrived from the airport, and had our dorm in Bondi and had our study hall in Bondi. That's where we started all our programs from, right here in Bondi. From there we had the opportunity to do the programs across Sydney and some programs that I was involved in were around Australia and beyond. I was just reminiscing of my opportunity to do the first Passover Seder in Kathmandu, Nepal in 1989. From Sydney went to Nepal to organise the biggest Seder in the world, and today it's still the biggest Seder in the world. That was a great experience.

Interviewer: Fantastic. When you first arrived in the area, what did you think of it? What were your first impressions, and did you have any big changes that you had to deal with that you want to share?

Mendel Kastel: It was clearly very exciting arriving in Bondi, getting to meet a new community who came out to welcome us as the students who arrived to be able to teach and spread Judaism to the community. It was a very exciting time and, clearly, arriving in Bondi and meeting the people in Bondi was very welcoming. Although different to New York City, there wasn't such a large community as there was in New York City or so many kosher restaurants or kosher food or communities. With time that's changed as well, and that's grown over the years as well. It was a great time to arrive in Sydney and to really be part of the community.

Interviewer: How do you think the Jewish community has shaped the local area here?

Mendel Kastel: I think the Jewish community is a big part of the local area, both in the sense of some of the outreach and community activities that it does to the wider community, as well as bringing the Jewish culture to the area. Jewish culture would be quite vast as the different communities have come from different parts of the world, and then they've brought with them their local cultures, whether being from Poland, or whether being from Russia or from South Africa or

from New York. Bringing all those cultures to Australia as well as the Jewish flavour to that has really made this area quite spectacular.

Interviewer: We might talk a little bit now on Jewish food. Of course, food is an important part of Jewish culture. Can you tell me about Jewish food or food in general that you had in the States and whether you've got any memories about eating favourite food as a child?

Mendel Kastel: Jewish food has got some traditional Jewish foods that we would refer to whether it be chopped liver, gefilte fish, matza balls. More broadly, I guess, from where I sit it's more about kosher food and different kinds of foods that are made with kosher food. Whether you talk about kosher Chinese or kosher Israeli, different flavours that are now kosher. That, over the years in Sydney, to see different restaurants pop up with different flavours, different chefs, different programs to capitalise on food.

Clearly, the different festivals have different kinds of food, whether you're talking about the festival of Shavuot with the traditional cheese cake and ice cream, which weaves itself not just as a food, but over the programs and the synagogues. They come to hear the reading of the Torah and then they have the dairy and the ice cream and the ice cream party. Food really becomes an intricate part of Jewish tradition and religion and practice.

Interviewer: Was the food that you had access to, or the food that people had in the local community here different to what it was in the States at all?

Mendel Kastel: There's definitely different kinds of kosher foods that I didn't experience as a child in New York. Vegemite is something that I still can't eat it, but it's definitely something different. Pavlova is one of the other things that jumps to mind. There are other traditional Australian kosher foods. There's certain things that I grew up with in New York that are not available here yet. As time goes on there are new products always arriving here, and the proliferation of kosher, in particular in Bondi, has been huge through the supermarkets, whether it's Coles or Woolies or any of the other supermarkets and the local kosher stores has been tremendous compared to what it was like when I arrived here 25 years ago.

Interviewer: I know we've covered a little bit, but tell me a little bit more about the special foods that are prepared and eaten during family get-togethers and Jewish holidays, specifically, that you enjoy.

Mendel Kastel: Traditionally on Jewish holidays and the Sabbath, it's tradition to have fish and meat as well as wine. We've seen, especially in Australia, a lot more kosher wines and very high quality wines which are even sold in New York from Australia. Fish, so traditionally we had what was gefilte fish in a log form. Here I've discovered that we have fish balls that are made into a little ball that's either fried or cooked or baked.

A similar sort of concept, but each community develops it in its own way. Chopped liver is chopped liver, so whether it's in New York or whether it's here. I'm still missing a good pastrami sandwich, but slowly these things are developing here in Australia as well. Meat pies is something that I didn't have growing up in New York. It's an Australian concept. To be able to have a nice kosher meat pie and all the flavours of kosher meat pies has also been quite interesting here.

Interviewer: It'd be nice to know, actually, what's in the pie, like your kosher pie, because I think most pies you just don't know what's in them.

Mendel Kastel: The kosher pies are limited in what they can throw in there. Hopefully, as well as the sausages, I think the kosher sausages and kosher pies are a bit healthier than some of the others because they're limited in what they're allowed to throw in there.

Interviewer: Is there such a thing as a kosher hot dog?

Mendel Kastel: Yes, there's a kosher hot dog, there's a kosher sausage. In New York kosher hot dogs are huge. Even you go to the local baseball game and they have kosher hot dogs for sale. We're not quite there yet in Australia, but kosher hot dog in America is very popular, even by people who don't keep kosher.

Interviewer: Okay. We'll move on to something which, of course, is very close to your heart, the pray section. Of course, the essence of Judaism is in its rituals and observances. In this section we'd love to hear about the mitzvahs and traditions and how it has, obviously, shaped your identity and passing down from generation to generation.

Mendel Kastel: Prayer in Jewish tradition is very much part of my family, my tradition. My father's a rabbi. My grandfather's was a rabbi, my great-grandfather's was a rabbi, so I didn't have much choice but to be a rabbi, even though each one of them is a different kind of rabbi. One is more involved in education, one's more involved in outreach, one's more higher learning. I also had the opportunity to be a congregational rabbi at the Great Synagogue for 14 years. Now I'm involved more in community outreach, welfare kind of work. My connection with Judaism and trying to influence others or connect with others is trying to be entrepreneurial about it, trying to think outside the square, do different kinds of programs.

Whether it was bring Jimmy Barnes to the Great Synagogue, which was quite a hit. I think that it was a packed synagogue during the week, which was quite special. That was for Chanukah together with the play put on by the Sydney Theatre Company, or whether it was putting twenty tons of snow for Chanukah in Hyde Park and the [Sydney Morning] Herald wanting to know what happens if Santa turned up to the Jewish Chanukah snow party, to different other kinds of programs that we run to be able to connect with people. Finding ways to make Judaism more accessible and ways that it can talk to people.

At the same time when we talk about prayer and we talk about meditation, mindfulness, etcetera, particularly in the work that I do now which is working with people who might be going through a difficult time, whether it's mental health issues, whether it's drug and alcohol issues, homelessness, etcetera, an opportunity to be able to connect with their traditions, to connect with God and to be able to pray and have a sense of compass and focus as to not feeling completely alone. I think there is definitely elements of that.

For me to be able to centre myself on a daily basis three times a day as we pray, to be able to have my time focused and connected with God to be able to set me on my path of my daily work is also very important. Then, general spirituality, which cuts across all religions, and the opportunity to be able to work as a chaplain, whether it's for the New South Wales Police, or whether it's Reddam School, or whether it's at the local hospital. In many different ways to be able to have that

spiritual connection which really connects all people is also quite special. Really, prayer, religion, tradition, and spirituality all have a very strong interlinking connection.

Interviewer: There's one thing that's continually driven home to me is the link between Judaism and a very close-knit family and a very close-knit community just through the traditional aspects of Judaism. Can you comment a little bit?

Mendel Kastel: Judaism is very much focused around, first, the individual, the family and the community. Even when we talk about prayer, there's a quorum to be able to recite certain prayers called the minyan, which is 10 men. When people are eating together, if there's three people who have eaten together, then there's a sense of the blessing of thanks afterwards, takes on a special extra meaning. There is definitely a concept of togetherness, that sense of family, that sense of community that very much pervades all aspects of prayer or community celebrations, etcetera.

Interviewer: We now move on to naches, which is a concept that I've only just learnt about in the last few weeks, but I think it's fantastic. Of course, every Jewish person wants some naches in their life. Naches could also be seen as success in learning and giving back to the community, and everybody seems to have a fairly common, but slightly different interpretations of what that actually means. What does it mean to you, and does it have any special significance?

Mendel Kastel: Naches is something that really brings joy to an individual. It can come in different ways. There's a personal naches. Tonight I will have the opportunity to cut my son's hair for the first time as he turns three, so he'll have his upsherin, and he puts on his yarmulke, his kippah and his tzitzit. He puts a coin in the charity box and everybody comes and says a le'chaim. That's a sense of naches on a personal level, or the celebration of my [oldest] son getting married, which also brings me a tremendous amount of naches, or when you can actually make a difference for a person.

Whether it's my work in the community at Jewish House where a person walks in who's quite upset and broken, who's homeless and really be able to help turn their life around. To be able to give them a bed, to be able to provide them with some counselling, some advice linking them to appropriate services and then to see them a month or two later how they're back on their feet and really starting to get things together, they've got a job, they're starting to smile again, those are things that really bring you naches.

That you can actually make a difference, and you can really bring that happiness and that joy back to a person, to an individual, to a family, has been a huge amount of naches to me. A time when you're mediating with a family where there are parts of the family that are not getting on with each other, then, be able to see them a few months later at a simcha, a joyous occasion, or getting on with each other. These are really things that really bring you naches. It's a sense of achievement, but there's a special joy that comes with being able to achieve that, which we call naches.

Interviewer: It's funny that you say a sense of achievement because some people have been telling me that it's not pride in yourself, it's pride in other people. Is that not strictly true?

Mendel Kastel: I think it's one of those words that everybody makes the connection for themselves how it works. I think that naches is a mixture of both. It's being able to be happy for the achievements of the other, as well as feeling a sense of pride in yourself as well, that you've had a part to play in what's been achieved.

Interviewer: What do you hope for your children and, ultimately, grandchildren?

Mendel Kastel: When thinking about my children, my grandchildren, what I'd like for them, very much I'd like them to be able to have that sense of community, that sense of giving back, that sense of feeling as a member of the community, and therefore their spirituality, their Judaism is very much part of them as they understand they have a difference to make in this world. They've come into this world and they can actually make a difference in this world.

We're taught every person is to see themselves as God created them as an individual, and they're a whole world in themselves, and they can actually make a difference in this world. That's what I'd like them to do, so think, "What can I do?" It doesn't have to be the same thing that I've done, but what can they do to contribute to the world to make the world a better place?

Interviewer: What do you think your biggest achievement in life is, and why?

Mendel Kastel: I think my biggest achievement in life is my children and to see them growing up, to see them giving back to the community, getting involved in the community, loving their Judaism, is very much what I'm the most proud of. Clearly, there are other things that I've done in the community and programs that I've had the opportunity to implement and connect with people, which I'm also very proud of. I think family's really the most important to me.

Interviewer: I guess, again, exploring the theme, what activities are you involved in for the wider Waverly community that also bring you naches?

Mendel Kastel: Looking at different programs and activities that I'm involved in, so I'm involved with Jewish House, which is a crisis centre that helps people who are going through any kinds of crisis, whether it's family breakdown, whether it's domestic violence, whether it's homelessness, drug and alcohol, etcetera and being able to develop programs to be able to help them through that crisis. I'm also the chaplain to the police and being able to play a role in supporting the New South Wales Police who do such a wonderful job in the community and for me to play a little bit of a role in supporting them.

I've always had an interest in medicine, and therefore have worked in hospitals since I was 12 visiting patients in hospitals, and I still do it today as chaplain to St Vincent's Hospital and Prince of Wales Hospital, Sydney Clinic and Wolper Hospital and the Children's Hospital and Women's hospitals. That's, again, been an opportunity to be able to connect with people and to be able to bring and give back to people. We've just developed a little package to give to new mums with a little Torah and some other goodies about being a new mum and what it means.

We've worked with places like Sydney Clinic where as you walk in there's a little mezuzah on the door and they get grape juice and challah for patients that are in there just to make them feel a little bit more at home. I'm on the board of WAYS, Waverly Action for Youth Services, which is a wonderful charity and being able to help young people. I was involved with a charity called Point Zero, which used to have vans that used to go out on Saturday nights and hang out with children. I'm also the founder and I'm on the committee of an organisation called J-Junction which introduces Jewish singles across the country, a lot of different bits and pieces, which is great. It's great to have the opportunity to give back to the community and to be embraced by the community and supported by the community.

Interviewer: Fantastic. You've certainly got a lot to talk about there, don't you? Is there anything else you want to talk about before we finish up?

Mendel Kastel: You're talking about memorabilia and other things that you wanted to add to be able to then see which direction you want to go. I had the opportunity to spend time in Russia and working with the Russian community in Russia, which gave me the opportunity to learn a bit of Russian, which, then helps me in my work here in the community with having another language to work with as well. Although my Russian is not very good, but it's enough to carry a conversation and to be able to connect with people.

I had the opportunity to do the first Seder in Kathmandu in Nepal, where we had over 500 people, and today is the biggest Seder in the world. Also, with the tragedies that have happened there lately, it gives me, again, a connection with Nepal and the rabbi there knowing that it was probably the first Seder in Nepal, the first push of Judaism and Chabad in Nepal, and now the growth of that sort of work there.

I've had the opportunity to run many children's camps while I was here, whether it be overnight camps or day camps, and then to meet these children as they grow up and they're now adults and they want to be able to get involved helping others. There's lots of different programs that I've been involved in and have memorabilia or have different things that, I guess, we can pull together to be able to reflect on some of the different activities and programs that I've been involved in in the community.

Interviewer: That's great. Fantastic. Anything that you've touched on in this interview is what we would, ultimately, love as imagery to just augment your story.

Mendel Kastel: I think I mentioned to you that at one point there was an exhibition at Sydney Airport which was a welcome to Sydney exhibition. At that point they had me down at Bondi Beach holding a samovar. They took a picture of me and the family at Bondi Beach, which was then displayed at Sydney airport and is now in the archives of the Australian Museum.

My grandfather was very involved in gathering manuscripts from the Vatican and being able to reprint them. He has published a number of Jewish books as well. I've got a set of them and my son, who's got his name, also has his own set of those books. That's on my mother's side. My father's father was a rabbi, and my mother's mother was a rabbi. It goes in all directions.

Interviewer: Your son would have to be thinking, "Got to be a rabbi."

Mendel Kastel: He's qualified as a rabbi, but he's into business. He's doing a foreign exchange. He's just got married only a few weeks ago. He's here for a few months, and then he's heading off to Florida where he's going to live.