I. Arriving at Stanford

MAXWELL STEINBERG Interview

WELCOMED: Tell us where you're from and about your background.

Maxwell Steinberg: I grew up in Manhattan, so a great deal of my early understanding of what it meant to be Jewish came from being in what felt, in many ways, like an epicenter of the American Jewish story: New York City. Most people in my broader world were Jewish. I grew up attending Hebrew school and a Conservative synagogue, so there was a rhythm to it: learning, holidays, and being around other families doing the same thing. Even before I could fully articulate it to myself as a child, I felt that I belonged to a community shaped by structure, memory, and expectations about how one ought to treat other people.

WELCOMED: What do you believe?

Maxwell Steinberg: I believe in one G-d, as the Torah teaches, and I read sacred and historical Jewish texts as moral guides, educational stories, and a cultural record. My older brother received a more traditional Jewish education, with extensive Hebrew language and religious instruction. By the time I attended Hebrew school, it had become more cultural and movement-based, with events and activities. I would have liked more of what my brother received, but I also appreciate my own experience.

Much of my early Jewish life extended beyond Hebrew school into community life in New York, where one is surrounded by different kinds of Jewishness and where people's relationships to tradition can be both visible and ordinary at the same time. There is a density to it. You notice how much religious identity exists in people's lives, habits, and communal spaces. Many kids like me went to Jewish sleepaway camp, which was culturally Jewish in that it avoided pork and shellfish, and we baked challah for Friday evenings and Saturdays. But I would not call it religious in the sense of regular prayer and formal observance. It was more like the various Jewish youth groups I belonged to, some Zionist but not religious, some more religious, and some more cultural or social organizations with different kinds of public service opportunities.

WELCOMED: What are some experiences that shaped you?

Maxwell Steinberg: One especially important experience came through Dorot, which means "generations" in Hebrew, a community organization that connects younger people with older adults. As part of that program, I was matched with an elderly woman who lived alone on the Upper West Side. I visited her apartment regularly. We would sit together and talk, and we would play games, sometimes chess and sometimes others that I brought with me. It was an opportunity to get to know a Jewish community member from another generation who was outside my family.

While it was not a religious experience in the obvious sense, it felt like a practical, lived translation of what I was being taught Judaism was supposed to be: you show up, you take responsibility, you notice who is alone, and you give someone your attention. In that way, it made the whole bar mitzvah process feel less like a performance and more like a moral commitment. The ceremony mattered because it pointed toward obligations that are real.

I remember the feeling of being one-on-one with someone whose life had a completely different scale from mine. She was older, and it seemed that her family was not nearby. I remember thinking about how easily a person can disappear into isolation, and how much it matters to be the kind of person who refuses to let that happen, even in small ways. That experience is part of why I still associate Judaism with responsibility and care, not only with ritual.

WELCOMED: What does that kind of community responsibility look like for you at Stanford?

Maxwell Steinberg: At Stanford, that sense of responsibility has shown up most concretely through organizing and participating in Jewish student life, especially through the Jewish Student Association, or JSA, where I serve on the underclassmen engagement committee. The work is basically community-building: trying to create events that people genuinely want to attend and trying to make the space feel welcoming. The staff are very welcoming as well. A couple of weeks before the end of last quarter, I had a great meeting with Rabbi Eli, whom I had met previously, simply because he wanted to make himself available to me.

That experience also makes you notice something very real about community: sometimes the people you imagine will attend do not, and sometimes the people you do not expect surprise you in meaningful ways. One of the most vivid examples for me was a Hillel event we held right before Thanksgiving break, a pizza-making event that was advertised as a freshman Hillel gathering. I started talking to someone there and learned that she was an international master's student from China, not Jewish, and she genuinely loved being there. She was happy to be in the room, happy to participate, and she had a warmth and curiosity that felt refreshing. It is striking when someone new, from outside the community, arrives and seems to understand the value of the space immediately. It reminded me that these communities allow us to practice hospitality and make room for others.

That is also why large communal events like Shabbat dinners can feel so important. These are moments designed to bring in people who might not otherwise step into Hillel at all. Sometimes it is as straightforward as food and atmosphere. At the same time, these events help people encounter Jewish community at its best: warm, relational, and open.