

WHO KILLED KESHER'S RABBI?

The Complete Series

By Gabby Deutch

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An Open Door

THE DOOR WAS AJAR.

That was the first thing Howard Smith noticed when he arrived at the pale brown townhouse on 25th Street NW, a stop he did not intend to make on the cold, clear morning of Feb. 29, 1984. The home sat just across the M Street Bridge and a short walk from Georgetown in Foggy Bottom, but it was located on a quiet, low-key block that felt a world away from the tony homes in the popular Washington neighborhood.

Smith, an up-and-coming astrophysicist working at the U.S. Naval Research Laboratory, was already running late for work, but that wasn't unusual for him that year. His mother had died a few months before, and Jewish law dictates that the immediate family members of the deceased should recite the Mourner's *Kaddish* prayer every day for 11 months following the death. Each morning, he walked to Keshet Israel Congregation, a small Orthodox synagogue in Georgetown, and joined its daily *minyan*, or prayer service. His colleagues knew that he often arrived at the office after 9 a.m.

On that day, he wouldn't get to work until well into the afternoon. First, he would make a gruesome discovery that would shock Washington and reverberate in Jewish communities around the world.

Normally, the congregation's longtime rabbi, Philip Rabinowitz, would arrive before the morning prayers started, but sometimes — when the assembled group was especially prompt — he got there a few minutes late. Rabinowitz never skipped the service entirely.

The morning *minyan* required a prayer quorum of 10 men, and that morning, only nine men showed up, with the rabbi nowhere to be found. Someone called Rabinowitz to see if he could come to fill out the group. When he didn't answer, the congregants grew concerned.

Most of them had to head off to work or to drop their kids at school. Smith, along with a Department of Energy attorney and two of the synagogue's unhurried retirees, drove the five blocks to Rabinowitz's home and walked up to the door.

Smith paused when he saw that the door was not closed. The rabbi would not purposely have left it unlocked; he always kept it dead-bolted shut, fearful of intruders.

Something was wrong.

One of the other men had a heart condition, so Smith urged the group to wait outside while he ventured indoors. He walked haltingly up the rickety stairs above the basement apartment to the front door

and gingerly pressed on the door. Smith cried out when he stepped inside.

RABINOWITZ lay face down on the floor of his study. Someone — likely someone he knew, police would later argue — had stabbed and bludgeoned him several times.

The rabbi and scholar was dead. He was 63.

No murder weapon would ever be found. The only item missing from the house, friends and family members would later notice, was the knife Rabinowitz used to perform ritual circumcisions. This struck them as more than a coincidence.

Rabinowitz was a man who had escaped antisemitic pogroms in Poland and lived a quiet, humble life in the face of unspeakable tragedies: his parents and siblings murdered by Nazis, the sudden death of his wife, Selma, at their daughter's wedding six years before. Synagogue members came to view him as a tragic figure. Despite it all, Rabinowitz fought to keep traditional Judaism alive in the nation's capital as most of Washington's Jews moved en masse further from the heart of the city or to the suburbs. Even as the neighborhood around him changed, and crime rates in Washington rose, the rabbi never faltered in his conviction that helping others was the pinnacle of his Judaism,

which saw that each person was created in God's image. *V'ahavta l'reacha kamocha* — love your fellow man as yourself.

Did that biblical teaching, central to Rabinowitz's worldview, lead the rabbi to his death?

IT'S BEEN NEARLY 40 YEARS since Rabbi Rabinowitz's murder, an event that continues to cast a dark pall over the synagogue. In that time, the neighborhood around Rabinowitz's home has changed dramatically, morphing from a quiet and at times seedy college neighborhood to a gentrifying block flanked by a Trader Joe's grocery store and a high-end sushi restaurant featuring a \$200 tasting menu. The synagogue itself has utterly transformed, too, from a small, tight-knit community far from the hub of D.C. Jewish life to an influential and well-regarded institution central to Washington Jewry.

In the days and weeks after Rabinowitz's murder, the police acted quickly, confident that the killer would be found. That confidence would crumble as the years wore on, and no arrests have ever been made. Today, police tell JI that the case isn't officially closed but won't say whether any detectives are still following leads.

In recent years, it has sometimes seemed as if it's open season on synagogues in America. In 2009, the FBI foiled a terrorist bomb plot to blow up temples in Riverdale, N.Y. In the fall of 2018, a man toting a military-style assault rifle and yelling antisemitic slurs murdered 11 worshippers during morning prayers at a Pittsburgh synagogue. Months later, a shooter opened fire at a synagogue in Poway, Calif., killing one and injuring three others. A rabbi was killed in December 2019 when a man barged into a Hanukkah party in a private home in Monsey, N.Y., and stabbed five people. And in January 2022, a British Pakistani man armed with a pistol stormed into a synagogue in Colleyville, Texas, and took four congregants, including its rabbi, hostage.

Those attacks have hit the American Jewish community hard, but the perpetrators' antisemitic motivations offer something of an answer for their heinous crimes. But what about what appears to be a senseless act of urban violence like the one

that befell Rabinowitz? No answer exists for congregants at Keshet Israel, even though there is speculation that the rabbi may have known his killer. The emotional wounds from the murder continue to cut deep at the congregation, nearly 40 years on. Writer Leon Wieseltier, a longtime congregant who joined the synagogue more than a decade after Rabinowitz's murder, told JI, "It's part of the ethos of the place."

TO ATTEMPT to understand Rabinowitz's death, it's instructive to first learn the story of his life. As the spiritual leader of a tight-knit Orthodox *shul* — Yiddish for synagogue — his life was not just his own. So too his death, and the mourning that followed, was shared by the many people who had called him a rabbi and a teacher over the years.

He led prayer services three times a day and made himself available to anyone who had religious queries. During the so-called "lean years" of the 1950s and 1960s, when the synagogue regularly struggled to reach the prayer quorum, Rabinowitz kept in his Rolodex a list of Jewish men who lived nearby; he would call them and tell them to come, quick, to help make a *minyan*, always apologizing profusely before making the ask. When the synagogue's coffers were nearly empty, he picked up a second job teaching at the nearby Hebrew Academy school. Much of his time was spent visiting convalescent congregants in area nursing homes and hospitals.

"Everybody liked him. He was a very gentle person," Smith, now an astrophysicist and lecturer at Harvard and the Smithsonian Institution, told *Jewish Insider* in an interview late last year.

At just over 5-feet-2, the mustachioed Rabinowitz was not an imposing figure. He was not the kind of rabbi whose booming voice filled the far reaches of the sanctuary. He interspersed his long, sometimes rambling sermons with Yiddish.

"You could hardly see him over the *bimah* [pulpit], and he had such a strong accent. I didn't understand a word of what he said," said Howard Rosen, an economist who is now the unofficial leader of "Keshet East," a group of synagogue alumni who live in Israel and gather annually to mark Rabinowitz's passing at his gravesite.

"He was so charming," said Sara Averick, a public relations executive who moved to Israel after living in Washington in her 20s. She recalled one of Rabinowitz's slightly off-color jokes, which managed to make use of erudite Jewish concepts in a way that poked fun at one of Keshet's older congregants. It was the man's 75th birthday, and Rabinowitz used *gematria* — the practice of assigning numerical values to Hebrew letters — to point out that 75 corresponded to the Hebrew letters *ayin*, which is 70, and *hay*, which is five.

"Some people think *ayin hay* is *alav ha'shalom*, but no!" Rabinowitz cried with a mischievous smile.

It was an esoteric joke about old age, but an effective one for the learned crowd: *Alav ha'shalom* is a Hebrew phrase, translated as "peace be upon him," and roughly equivalent in usage to "rest in peace." The two words start with the same letters, *ayin* and *hay*, that represent the number 75.

"He rolled his eyes afterward, like, 'Oh my gosh, I can't believe I said that,'" Averick recalled. "It was so funny."

He was like "a rabbinic Yogi Berra," Rosen added. "I mean, he used to say crazy, amazing, things, great lines."

Rabinowitz was not easily impressed by the political power brokers who came to Keshet when they passed through the nation's capital. Several people pointed out that Rabinowitz would introduce any attorney who belonged to the synagogue as a "prominent Washington lawyer," usually with a smirk. When Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan came to Keshet in 1978 for Yom Kippur, days after the signing of the Camp David Accords, Rabinowitz was unfazed by the famous Israeli general. Rabinowitz asked Dayan to open the ark, a key part of the Shabbat service before the Torah is removed, and he initially said no — but Rabinowitz would not take no for an answer, even from the esteemed guest.

RABINOWITZ grew up in a town next to Łomża, Poland, a small city located between Warsaw and Białystok. Before World War II, it was home to a major yeshiva and housed a grand synagogue designed by a renowned Italian architect. Jews comprised more than one-third of Łomża's population in the 1930s.

One of Rabinowitz's brothers had already gone to what was then Palestine; Łomża was an early Zionist hub, and the Łomża Yeshiva even opened a location in Petach Tikvah that still operates today.

By the end of the war, no Jews would remain in Łomża. Many had been shot in mass graves in a forest outside the city, while others were killed in concentration camps. Rabinowitz's parents were murdered by Nazis. *Hashem yikom damam*, he would say when he spoke of them. May God avenge their blood.

When Rabinowitz left home in 1938 to study in the United States, he changed his name from the Polish-inflected Fiszel Rabinowicz to Philip Rabinowitz and enrolled at the Hebrew Theological College in Skokie, Ill. His time there influenced him heavily — it's where Rabinowitz was steeped in the values of the *Mussar* movement, a religious tradition that emphasized the importance of both Torah learning and ethics.

For someone like Rabinowitz, "the worst crime," Reuven Schlenker explained, "was to embarrass somebody publicly."

"I thought he was exemplary," said Schlenker, a university librarian and *sofer*, or Torah scribe, who attended Keshet in the early 1980s. "I thought, 'Boy, I wish I could do that.' I'm not that quality."

DAYS BEFORE Rabbi Philip Rabinowitz was stabbed to death, he received the best kind of news: His daughter Miriam had given birth to a baby girl. The rabbi was supposed to attend the baby's naming ceremony days later.

The birth would be welcome news for any grandparent, but for Rabinowitz, it carried a special significance. It was a miracle, really, for Miriam to bring a child into the world after what happened at her wedding six years before.

Miriam Rabinowitz had a summer wedding on a humid August day in 1978, just weeks after her brother Asher got married in New Jersey. Because Miriam's wedding took place in Washington, it was a raucous synagogue affair — not just for family and personal friends but for the wide network of Keshet Israel Congregation members and their families, who were invited to attend the *tisch* and *bedeken*.

Miriam was holding court at her *bedeken*, a celebration that comes prior to the official ceremony at a traditional Jewish wedding. The Yiddish word means "to veil," and the ceremony culminates with the groom coming and putting the veil on his bride. The practice, which is meant to confirm the identity of the bride, comes from the biblical story of Jacob being tricked into marrying Leah, rather than his intended bride, Rachel. The *bedeken* is the first time the couple are intended to see each other on the day of their wedding.

Typically, a bride sits between her mother and soon-to-be mother-in-law, and women approach the bride to extend their congratulation wishes. Elsewhere in the banquet hall, at the *tisch*, the groom and the male guests sit around a large table, sharing words of Torah.

Ellen Epstein, who was active at Keshet and one of the few synagogue members to befriend the rabbi's wife, stood in the receiving line that night. "I was talking to the woman behind me, and then all this commotion and pandemonium broke out," Epstein recalled. Selma, the bride's mother, had fallen to the ground soon after she came into the room.

"She walked into the *bedeken* and took about three steps and then just collapsed," said Irving Haber, a physicist who was the synagogue vice president at the time.

Ambulances arrived quickly, and Selma was carted to the hospital, but it was too late. She died there, just as her daughter was preparing to walk down the aisle at the wedding venue.

"It never, never, never entered my mind that she had died," Epstein said. But that was the truth, leaving the rabbi — now widowed on the evening of his daughter's wedding — to make a horrible choice. He decided not to tell his own daughter, whose wedding it was, and proceed with the ceremony.

"The rabbi called the other rabbis in the area and they said they should go on with the wedding. So he went through the wedding not telling anyone of his family, even though he knew the prognosis was quite grim," Haber recalled.

The few who knew about the direness of the situation spoke almost in code. Ellen and her husband, David, learned of Selma's passing only obliquely through a

conversation at the wedding with a fellow congregant about vacation plans. David told one of the synagogue leaders that he and Ellen planned to take their young children to the beach the next morning.

"I wouldn't go if I were you," the other congregant said. It was a nod at the truth; no one wanted to say out loud what had happened to Selma while still at her daughter's wedding. So the Epsteins went home after the wedding and stayed in town, in case they would have to attend a funeral the next day.

The celebratory wedding dances continued as usual, but Rabinowitz sat on the sidelines, feigning tiredness rather than grief. A Jew who is mourning the death of an immediate family member is expected to avoid dancing at festivities like weddings and bar mitzvahs during their year-long mourning period.

"He didn't tell his daughter. He didn't tell anybody. He just stood there, and people would be dancing, and they wouldn't be looking at him. So he wouldn't let on," said Toby Grauman, a lawyer and rabbi who was close to the rabbi.

WHEN MIRIAM asked her father about her mother, his answer was like a riddle.

"She's in God's hand," Rabinowitz told Miriam.

"It was both accurate in his worldview and also not alarming," David Epstein told *Jewish Insider* in the attic office of Epstein's Chevy Chase, Md., home, surrounded by Judaica and souvenirs from his travels around the world. (David, a Texan by birth and by nature, was not wearing his usual cowboy hat on the day of the interview.) After Rabinowitz was killed, David served as the synagogue's liaison to the police, and he still has in his office a thick manila envelope stuffed with newspaper clippings, correspondence and notes from the year following the rabbi's death.

"That's an extraordinary strength," Grauman said of the rabbi's actions at Miriam's wedding. "Can you imagine the tragedy of someone, for that to happen at that moment, and then later, his own life ends in such tragedy? I mean, you can't write that story. You can't make it up. It's an incredible story of tragedy for someone who escaped the tragedies of Europe."

Miriam declined *Jewish Insider's* request for an interview.

INSIDE THE SANCTUARY at Keshet Israel, a plaque next to the *bimah* honors Rabinowitz. It's been there for decades in this building that is nearly 100 years old and far too small — the main sanctuary, with the original wooden, leather-backed seats and green stained glass windows, seats less than 250 people.

"He exemplified devotion to Torah with acts of loving-kindness for all whose lives he

touched," the plaque's inscription reads.

In Hebrew, there's a phrase that Jews often use to memorialize the dead: "May their memory be a blessing." On the plaque, Keshet's boosters took the saying one step further. "May the memory of the righteous be a blessing," it reads, regarding the esteemed rabbi.

But there is one other phrase, too, that is sometimes used, with a much darker connotation: "May God avenge their blood." Rabinowitz used this language when he spoke about his family members who had

been slaughtered in the Holocaust.

Many of the people who knew Rabinowitz well and were present at Keshet in the days and months after his murder still use that expression today when they speak of him. *Hashem yikom damo*. May God avenge his blood.

Those same people — the most loyal members of the Keshet community — claim to know who killed Rabinowitz.

The police never made an arrest. But they also never closed the case. ♦

APRIL 20, 2023

'Holiest of All Things'

THE FIRST THING VISITORS TO RABBI PHILIP RABINOWITZ'S HOME NOTICED WAS THE BOOKS.

Ratty paperbacks and small pocket-sized prayerbooks and gorgeous leather tomes, with titles in English, Hebrew and Yiddish. They covered the walls, the desk in his study and the stairs. There wasn't enough space for everything he wanted to learn. There wouldn't be time, either.

On the morning of Feb. 29, 1984, the rabbi's blood was splattered across the bookshelves and on top of a stack of papers on his desk. It covered a tan rug in the center of the study and a chair behind the desk. Nothing was out of place; the three-story townhouse had not been ransacked. Whoever had entered the home was not a thief — nothing of value was stolen.

Howard Smith didn't notice any of this at first. All he saw when he walked through the open front door at 8:15 a.m. was a figure lying facedown on the floor. His first thought was that the 63-year-old rabbi had passed out and fallen unconscious. Smith hurried to the phone on the rabbi's desk and dialed 911. He hoped the rabbi could still be saved, but the

stillness of the scene signaled otherwise.

WITHIN THE DECADE, Washington would gain a reputation as the nation's "murder capital." But in 1984, the city's homicide count hadn't yet begun to spike. Ambulances and police cruisers arrived swiftly, blue lights flashing and sirens blaring. Medics brought Rabinowitz's body to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, near the city jail, by ambulance. They pronounced him dead at 11:30 a.m. Police officers later estimated he had died around 8 p.m. the night before.

Smith, the young NASA astrophysicist who was a regular at Rabinowitz's daily *minyan* that year, walked outside to the three other men from the synagogue who had accompanied him to Rabinowitz's home. Their faces were ashen. They had heard him gasp.

"Go back to the shul," Smith told them. "We have to tell people."

Smith went with the police back to the station, where he filled out a police report and answered a few questions. He never heard from anyone from the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) again.

A spokesperson for MPD declined to make any department officials available for an interview about this case or about the department's cold case investigations, and the department denied *Jewish Insider's* Freedom of Information Act request for documents related to the police investigation.

"This case remains under investigation, however, there are no active leads we are currently pursuing in this case. We have spoken with witnesses and actively investigated over the years," MPD public affairs specialist Alaina Gertz told *JI* in an emailed statement in December. "What we do know is that the Rabbi was in good-standing and well-respected in the community, and appears to not have been involved in any crime-related activity that we're aware of."

THE MEN walked into Keshet Israel Congregation and headed to the social hall and small kitchen, where a group of women was preparing for a lunch the synagogue planned to host that afternoon for the chief rabbi of the Israeli army. Nancy James glanced up at the men.

She and her husband, Bruce, had met through the synagogue years earlier at a picnic on Lag BaOmer, a Jewish holiday celebrated in the spring with picnics and bonfires. Bruce, who was in law school when they met, performed as a magician in his spare time. He came to the picnic straight from a gig at a Chabad house in the suburbs and ended up doing magic at Keshet, too. ("I thought he was so weird coming to a picnic in a three-piece suit. I said, 'This guy is a nut,'" Nancy recalled later.)

The couple married in 1982 and became one of Keshet's most involved couples. They drafted the synagogue newsletter each week. Three days before Rabinowitz died, they brought him a draft to review, as they did every week. That day he said something unexpected.

"He sort of gave us a *bracha*," Nancy recalled, using the Hebrew word for blessing. "He said, 'You're going to have a beautiful child with beautiful eyes.'" Nancy had been experiencing fertility problems, and she found out she was pregnant with their first and only child soon after Rabinowitz died.

On that February morning, Nancy eyed the men who had just arrived back at synagogue. They looked distraught.

"Did you find the rabbi?" she asked. The men nodded yes, unable to say anything else.

"Is everything alright?" They shook their heads no. They could not find the words to tell her that their beloved teacher was dead.

THE NEWS BEGAN TO SPREAD, rippling out through the Washington area, the country and across the globe. The small group at the synagogue took turns making phone calls to friends and congregants. Former students in New York and a synagogue board member visiting family in Ohio got calls. The board president, who was on a cross-country flight, arrived home to find notes stuffed under his door telling him to go straight to the synagogue. Someone must have called the rabbi's son in New Jersey, his daughter in Chicago and his brother in Israel, but no one can remember who.

One of the first people to hear about the rabbi was Toby Grauman, the lawyer who was also an ordained rabbi. Everyone at Keshet called him Tuvia, his Hebrew

name. In the year and a half between the rabbi's murder and the hiring of a new rabbi, Grauman would step in as an interim spiritual leader, tending to the community's religious needs and shepherding them through a year of mourning.

Grauman got the call at his law office and immediately went to the crime scene, which had been cordoned off with police tape. The body had already been taken to the morgue, which concerned Grauman. He walked up to the first police officer he saw.

"Under Jewish law," Grauman told the detective, "autopsies are forbidden."

"Well," the officer responded, "we're going to have to do something, because it's a homicide." Washington law requires that an autopsy be conducted whenever there is a violent death. But Orthodox Jewish scholars interpret Jewish law as prohibiting autopsies except in the most extreme circumstances. Desecration of a dead body is forbidden because, the logic goes, humans are created in the image of God.

GRAUMAN went to the morgue and set up what he called a "triage" with an Orthodox pathologist at an area hospital and a rabbinic authority on the phone from New York. Grauman stood at a distance, watching as the medical examiner cut into the rabbi's body.

The Jewish principle also holds that, as much as is possible, every part of the body must be buried together — including any blood that was lost in a violent death. The bloodstained portions of the carpet in Rabinowitz's study were cut out to be saved, and Grauman gathered any blood that dripped onto the operating table during the autopsy. The surgical gloves and gowns of the doctors who performed the autopsy were also preserved and buried with the rabbi.

"They had to do what they had to do, but they did it in a very honorable sort of way. They appreciated what we needed and we understood what they needed," Grauman said later.

The process was not entirely as smooth as Grauman remembered.

Four months after the murder, the deputy medical examiner, Douglas Dixon, resigned, citing undue political pressure on him in the position — including from

the mayor's assistant on religious affairs, who had mediated between Grauman and Dixon over how to conduct the autopsy. "There was a time during that day when I was prepared to take off my gloves and walk out, resigning not only as acting chief but as deputy medical examiner as well, in protest over what I consider to be an extremely dangerous meddling," Dixon told *The Washington Post* when he resigned that July.

Dixon was able to conduct a partial autopsy, overseen by Grauman, but he did it grudgingly. Helene Karpa, the president of the Jewish Community Council of Greater Washington, wrote in a letter to the editor of *The Post* that Dixon's remark was "shockingly callous."

"While we did not wish to hamper the police investigation in any way, it was only appropriate to see to it that Rabbi Rabinowitz, a pious Orthodox Jew and rabbi of Keshet Israel in Georgetown, be treated in death by the principles that he lived in life," Karpa wrote. "Jewish law and tradition regard the human body as the receptacle that holds the holiest of all things — a human life."

MANY KESHERITES, as they call themselves, remember exactly where they were when they received the call that Rabinowitz was dead. They can pinpoint it with specificity, in the same way that others recall the moment they learned that hijacked planes flew into the Twin Towers.

Gerard Leval was in a conference room at a Baltimore law firm hammering out the details of a deal. Someone interrupted the meeting and asked him to come to the phone, where he learned the rabbi had died. He quickly wrapped up the meeting and got in his car to drive back to Washington.

Reuven Eliaz worked at the Israeli Embassy up Connecticut Avenue, and as soon as he heard the news, he took the embassy's security officer to the crime scene. They were concerned it might have been terrorism. Eleven years earlier, the Israeli military attaché in Washington was shot to death in his driveway in Chevy Chase, Md. That crime also remains unsolved. But detectives investigating Rabinowitz's death would quickly rule out antisemitism as a motivation when they reached the conclusion that the murderer was likely

someone the rabbi knew.

Others, like synagogue board vice president Irving Haber, have buried the memory over the years. “Unlike when Kennedy was killed, I don’t remember the moment. It was so traumatic. It was so personal that I don’t remember how I found out,” Irving told JI recently.

What everyone does remember is that, regardless of how they learned the news, they responded in the same way. They came to Keshet. All day long, people came. Over 150 people were at *ma’ariv*, the evening prayer service, which usually drew the bare minimum of 10 men.

By then, the autopsy was completed and Rabinowitz’s body had been moved to the funeral home. A group of men went there after *ma’ariv* to keep *shmirah*.

According to Jewish tradition, Jews must keep *shmirah*, or guard, over the dead — it’s a crucial step in shepherding a person’s soul from this life to the world to come, as well as a sign of respect for the person and their family. Usually, this task involves sitting next to the coffin and reading psalms. Observant Jews hold a funeral as quickly as they can, sometimes just hours after a person dies. In the event a funeral must fall the next day, the *shomrim*, or guards, stay with the body all through the day and night.

“We were supposed to read *tehillim* [psalms], and I couldn’t. I just stumbled,” Eliaz said recently. It was too hard.

THE NEXT MORNING, many congregants again gathered at the synagogue, a three-story brown-brick edifice on a residential corner in Georgetown, located between a pale-green townhouse and a white one, which now houses the synagogue’s offices. The bay windows are filled with a green stained glass that looks almost like tie-dye, which one Keshet member says was likely less an aesthetic choice than a financial one: It was less expensive than the elaborate stained-glass artwork now common at American synagogues. A mold of the Twin Tablets with the Ten Commandments sits above the windows on the side of the building.

It’s important to know what Keshet looks like from the outside because for many people who came to honor the rabbi, it’s all they saw that morning. Inside was

standing room only, and anyone who was not a synagogue member was asked to stand outdoors. The rabbi’s students, friends and admirers snaked onto the redbrick sidewalks. Loudspeakers were set up so that the outside crowds could hear the service and the eulogies. Hundreds of people attended the funeral.

“We were all like siblings, all *mishpocha* [family], huddling together,” said Sara Averick, who was a young Keshet member at the time.

Inside, the coffin had been brought to the upstairs balcony. The funeral started early to ensure that Rabinowitz’s body would arrive at Dulles International Airport in time for a noon flight to New York, and then a flight to Israel, where he would be buried next to his wife. (Two hundred people, mostly former students, attended the burial at Eretz Hachaim Cemetery in Beit Shemesh, Israel.) When the hearse left the synagogue, mourners ran alongside it for two blocks.

Prominent local rabbis shared heartfelt, painful eulogies. An assistant to President Ronald Reagan brought condolences from the White House. Israeli Ambassador Meir Rosenne spoke; two years earlier, Keshet had been Rosenne’s very first stop when he arrived in Washington. Upon landing, the diplomat went straight to the synagogue from the airport to say *Kaddish* for a *yahrzeit*, the anniversary of the death of a loved one.

Rabbi Gedaliah Anemer, a close friend of Rabinowitz and a fellow Orthodox rabbi, stood just outside the synagogue’s main doors, which were left open. As a *Kohen*, a descendant of the Jewish priests, Anemer could not be in the same room as the body. (Jewish law says that *Kohanim* cannot have contact with corpses.) So he delivered his eulogy via a public address system. “He gave of himself; he gave of his soul; he gave of his essence,” Anemer said of Rabinowitz.

Remembrances poured in for weeks, published in synagogue bulletins and shared at Shabbat services.

“When I came to Georgetown the shul was at a low point in its fortunes, and there is no question that Rabbi Rabinowitz’s determination kept it alive, and that he led it to its present remarkable renaissance,” the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Herman Wouk wrote in a remembrance. “For me he will always be the rabbi.”

Grauman, the congregant who handled the autopsy, gave the final eulogy. He used his remarks to tell the hundreds of people in the room — the largest crowd ever at Keshet — that the matter is in God’s hands, and not in the domain of man, even as a police investigation was already underway.

“For those who understood it, I think it really helped them understand that we may be powerless, we may have no control over the situation, and that will be frustrating,” Grauman said later. “There will not be closure here. That’s the word that everybody was using: closure. There won’t be closure, because we will not be able to close it. But *Hashem Yinakem Damo*.” God will avenge his blood.

This was one day after Rabinowitz was murdered, and though emotional closure could never come, the hundreds of people gathered at Keshet that day still had hope the police would bring a suspect to justice. In conversations with Keshet congregants, police confidently insisted they would swiftly apprehend the suspect.

In fact, several people left the funeral feeling that the killer had been among them that day. ♦

Love the Stranger

A CLOUD OF GRIEF HUNG OVER RABBI PHILIP RABINOWITZ IN THE YEARS BEFORE HIS MURDER.

The Georgetown rabbi maintained his stature as the spiritual and intellectual beating heart of Keshet Israel Congregation, but after his wife died, something fundamental had changed. He was broken.

The rabbi had to navigate the difficult halacha, or Jewish law, around burial and matrimony in a way that few others had done before. He wanted his daughter to be able to enjoy life as a newlywed as much as possible while also mourning her mother. He opted to forego immediately sitting *shiva* for his wife so that his daughter could spend the week after her wedding celebrating with the traditional *Sheva Brachot*, or Seven Blessings, a week of festive gatherings.

After a period of intense emotional whiplash, Rabinowitz was left to reenter normal life on his own.

"At the time of her death, I'm reasonably certain that Rabbi Rabinowitz had no inkling of how to boil water, no idea how to do any cooking at all," said Dan Klein, a longtime Keshet member. "But he learned, and there were a few members of the congregation who helped him out a little bit, and he eventually got to the point where he could invite a few people over for a Shabbat meal."

THE RABBI did not regularly have guests over, though, and congregants began to walk or drive him home after evening prayers. The neighborhood wasn't particularly unsafe — Georgetown was spared the worst of the violent crime that racked Washington in the 1980s and 1990s — but Rabinowitz's residence was closer to The George Washington University campus than it was to the multimillion-dollar Georgetown homes, and besides, "it was pitch black," said Howard Rosen, who often walked with Rabinowitz on his way back to the GWU dorms.

Still, Rabinowitz was not willing to only

accept congregants' pity and shrink from his duties. In 1979, he quit his teaching job at a local Jewish school to focus full-time on the congregation. He continued his responsibilities as a religious leader, but he also doubled down in his commitment to pastoral care. This, congregants say, is where he really shined: remembering the names of all of your kids, or visiting you when you were sick, and making it clear he saw you as a person, and not just as the 10th member of a prayer quorum.

"It's incredible that people like this, who have gone through a life like that... He went through the worst experience in life — he was a survivor and refugee and it just made him more kind and generous," said Rosen. Some would later question, only in hindsight, whether he had been too generous.

Rabinowitz always made a point of welcoming anyone who walked through Keshet's doors. In the last few years of his life, that included several individuals who were homeless. These visitors, though also Jewish, did not always fit in with Keshet's base of highly educated professionals.

One woman who came to services regularly was believed to suffer from schizophrenia. "She wasn't socialized like the rest of the people who went to synagogue. Sometimes she was disruptive. She may not have been dressed appropriately, acting out appropriately, you know. That was just part of our community," Rosen said.

Rosen recalled another man who would sometimes come to evening services "with alcohol on his breath." One time, Rosen left the synagogue with him and they started walking together. The man said good night before walking into Rock Creek Park, the massive urban park in the center of Washington. It was a warm night, and that's where he planned to sleep.

Oh, Rosen thought. So he's going home, and we're going home.

THE RABBI AND HIS WIFE had never been the type of gregarious couple that was

always socializing or having people over for holiday meals. Selma Rabinowitz harbored some resentment for the old-timers on the synagogue's board whom she felt didn't treat her husband properly.

Measured financially, this was a statement of fact: The synagogue paid him so little that Rabinowitz had to take the job teaching at the Hebrew Academy on 16th Street in Northwest Washington.

"I don't think anyone disliked him. They just didn't hold him in as high regard as I think he deserved. They thought they could toss him around at will. He had no power base to fight back," Irving Haber said of the older synagogue members. According to Keshet lore, Rabinowitz defeated an attempt to oust him — the mythology varies as to exactly when it was — when a crowd of loyal young members showed up at the secretive bagel brunch where the vote was being held.

The tradition of Modern Orthodoxy maintains that observant Jews can live, work and interact in the secular world while also following the strictures of Jewish law. And at Keshet Israel Congregation, two blocks away from Georgetown's busiest commercial corridor and just a mile or two from the White House and the U.S. Capitol, congregants keep one foot firmly planted in the secular world.

Rabinowitz presided over a community that would become known for its eclectic mix of acclaimed writers, famed intellectuals and members of the political elite. In 2000, when Joe Lieberman, the Connecticut senator and Keshet Israel member, ran for vice president, images of the synagogue appeared on the front pages of newspapers around the world. The rich Jewish life that exists today in Georgetown, one of Washington's most exclusive neighborhoods, flourished because Rabinowitz managed to leave his native Europe before the Holocaust.

The synagogue was started by a ragtag group of Jewish merchants in 1911. Within two decades, the founders of what was originally called the Georgetown Hebrew Benevolent Association had pooled enough

money to purchase a plot of land at 28th and N streets, two blocks from M Street, Georgetown's main drag. This was prime real estate for a group of men who usually went straight from Saturday morning prayers — which were held earlier than was traditional, at their request — to open their shops.

BACK THEN IN THE 1910S, Georgetown wasn't yet the posh enclave that came to be associated with the Kennedys and Washington's highest social castes. The Jews who arrived in Georgetown and opened stores at the turn of the 20th century "weren't moving to a wealthy Georgetown that you picture today," said Linda Brody Blumenreich, whose grandfather owned a clothing store on M Street for decades. These were working-class Eastern European immigrants, while the wealthier and more educated German Jews ("the lawyers and doctors," Blumenreich explained) settled on 16th Street.

Kesher was never a typical synagogue. Located in a neighborhood where the median home price is now more than \$1.5 million, Kesher's membership has always been transient, with people cycling in and out depending in part on what they can afford.

Driving and the use of electronics are prohibited on Shabbat, so observant Jews have unique geographic constraints when choosing a synagogue and a home. The result is a mix of young people in their 20s and 30s who are renting, eventually moving out to the suburbs when they have kids; and older people, often retirees or empty-nesters who come back to the city to downsize.

Rabinowitz arrived at Kesher in 1950. Washington's suburbs were just starting to explode: Several times over the years Rabinowitz would have to fight with synagogue leaders who wanted to uproot Kesher and move it to Maryland, or turn it into a Conservative synagogue, meaning it would adhere less strictly to Jewish law.

"It's not nice to say," one longtime Kesher member confessed, "but most of the presidents drove to shul." (David Epstein, the retired lawyer who served as the synagogue's liaison to the police after the murder, described it this way: "I get there magically." He lives in Maryland and has

been going to Kesher for 60 years.)

"Rabbi Rabinowitz kept the flame going at a time when the flames of urban Judaism were flickering, and he impacted lives. There are not too many rabbis who can do that," said Gerard Leval, a partner at the Washington law firm ArentFox Schiff.

Beginning in the 1970s, the synagogue experienced a revival. It was slow at first before picking up in the 1980s and 1990s, as Washington gentrified and young Orthodox Jews who came to Washington for graduate school or jobs on Capitol Hill opted to live in the city instead of the suburbs.

Before Kesher's renaissance, the synagogue was more flexible in its religious character. There were some people who had grown up Orthodox and attended yeshiva schools who would sit and learn with Rabinowitz. Many spoke Yiddish. Others, like those who drove in from Maryland, were less observant. And then there were people in their 20s who did not grow up Orthodox but simply wandered into Kesher one day and never left, so deeply impacted were they by Rabinowitz's outstretched hand.

Leval, who grew up in Paris, went to Kesher one Shabbat at the invitation of a woman he was dating, hoping to impress her but not especially interested in the service himself.

"That's when Rabbi Rabinowitz came up to me. I had no particular plans to go back," Leval recalled. "It was quite a dramatic day." He and his date broke up not long after, but Leval kept going to Kesher. He later met his wife through a friend from shul.

"There was something comforting here in the midst of all the roughness of Washington, and there was something authentic, and I was immediately taken in by other young people who invited me to join them," said Leval. "It became a kind of family, extremely hospitable. And I would say that one has to attribute much of that to Rabbi Rabinowitz."

IN THE YEARS before Rabinowitz was killed, new life was pouring into Kesher. GW and Georgetown undergrads and graduate students, Capitol Hill and White House staffers, budding lobbyists and lawyers.

Young men and women were finding their way to this little synagogue. Neil Kritz, now the senior scholar in residence

at the U.S. Institute of Peace, recalled one *brit milah*, or ritual circumcision, that took place in the early 1980s, one of the first times in years that a new baby was born in the community.

Rabinowitz stood in the corner of the social hall, which for years had been half-empty at festive events and now was bursting with people. The rabbi looked at the crowd, smiling to himself. "He kept the synagogue going through all those years, and now we had succeeded. We had a new generation coming in and being born in the community," said Kritz.

But one man arrived in this period who would make a different kind of impression on the community. We will call this man, simply, the Russian, because that's how so many Kesherites refer to him to this day. Of all the many men and women Rabinowitz helped over the years, the Russian is the one people remember most.

The Russian was a Soviet Jewish émigré, a new arrival to this capitalist nation who was deeply suspicious of everyone — Jewish and otherwise — that he met. Today, descriptions of the Russian vary: He was an engineer, some say; a mathematician, according to others. He may or may not have been imprisoned in a Soviet gulag before coming to the United States. The rabbi took an interest in him, wanting to help. This was the rabbi's nature.

He sometimes let the Russian, who lived in a homeless shelter a couple miles from the synagogue, sleep overnight on the floor of the synagogue social hall. Rabinowitz often gave the Russian money from the community *tzedakah* box, used to collect donations for charity.

Like countless other immigrants before and after him, the Russian's skillset did not get him very far in a new country where he did not speak the language. Still, he came to Kesher, which may have offered some comfort as a place where Jews could gather safely, unlike in his native Russia. Before Rabinowitz died, the synagogue did not have any security.

Some people in the Kesher community grew uncomfortable with this occasionally belligerent man whom they viewed as an unpredictable nuisance in the community. They would prefer if he stopped coming to the synagogue, and they certainly did

not want him staying there overnight any longer. These congregants approached the rabbi with their concern and asked him to talk to the Russian and urge him to find shelter someplace else.

"You may run into people with psychological problems, and how do you know when you're in danger or not?" asked David Epstein, the congregant who served as a liaison to the police after Rabinowitz died. That question only came later, when it was too late.

"On the one hand," Epstein continued, "you're supposed to show kindness and so forth to the poor and the helpless. And on the other hand, are they going to turn on you at some point, because you're the only person they know? Are they going to get angry and take it out on you?"

These questions would haunt the Keshet community for decades to come. In the days after Rabinowitz was murdered, suspicion began to center on one person: the Russian.

SIX WEEKS after the rabbi died, Passover arrived. Rabinowitz had written one final D'var Torah, a sermon, before he died, and it

was published in the Passover bulletin that synagogue members received in the mail before the holiday. The newsletter arrived with an almost eerie quality, as though Rabinowitz was writing from the next world.

The message he chose to deliver that year — the last words of Torah he would ever write — centered on the mitzvah, or commandment, of *Ma'ot Chitim*, the collection of charity to donate to Jews in need locally and around the world. (Translated as "wheat monies," the term originally referred to wheat that was collected and distributed to people who needed food.)

"This important mitzvah is based on the idea that as an observant Jew, one cannot honestly sit down at the festive Seder and partake of everything, unless the less privileged are also able to celebrate the festival of freedom in an atmosphere of happiness," Rabinowitz wrote. "Thank G-d that the generosity of our Jewish people has sustained and strengthened many an underprivileged family, not only for the Seder of Pesach, but the rest of the days of the year as well."

"Our tradition," he wrote, "demands that

we care" when a Jew is in need.

A story began to take hold among Keshet congregants soon after Rabinowitz died: The Russian killed the rabbi. This impoverished and perhaps mentally unwell immigrant needed support, but he turned on the person who offered it, a pious man who took seriously his tradition's demand that he care when his fellow Jew was in need.

Even today, ask a 30-year-old member of Keshet who killed Rabinowitz. They weren't alive when he died, but to the extent that they know anything about Rabinowitz's death, they have heard: It was the Russian. This assertion is made with confidence by many. Yet the police never arrested the Russian — or anyone. Still: Could it be true? If it was him, how did he evade arrest for decades?

Despite Rabinowitz's generosity, everyone agrees that the rabbi would never open his door to a person he didn't know. He kept the deadbolt latched and he pulled back the curtain to see who was outside before allowing anyone in.

The night Rabinowitz died, he was expecting a visitor. ♦

APRIL 27, 2023

The Outsider

THE LAST NIGHT OF RABBI PHILIP RABINOWITZ'S LIFE STARTED JUST LIKE EVERY OTHER.

Like always, he ended the day at his Georgetown synagogue, where he led the brief evening prayer service. It was a small group of men, made up of the synagogue's most devout and those who needed to be with a *minyan* to say the Mourner's *Kaddish*.

One of the men present for the *minyan* on the evening of Feb. 28, 1984, was the homeless Russian man who had been a regular Keshet attendee for the better part

of two years. He was in his 40s or 50s, with a scruffy and somewhat unkempt look, usually wearing a cap that he kept on even inside the synagogue. He was restless that night, fidgety; he kept picking up items in the entryway to the sanctuary until Rabinowitz grew impatient with him.

"Put that down!" Rabinowitz said to the Russian, interrupting the prayer service. "Leave it alone. It's not yours."

It took a great deal for the rabbi to lose his patience. No one at Keshet remembers him talking to another congregant this way. Rabinowitz followed a Judaic school

of thought that stressed stringent ethical standards: "If they wanted to admonish somebody, they did it very privately. They did it in an indirect sort of way," said Reuven Schlenker, who frequented Keshet during this period.

Still, no one thought too much about the interaction. Not until later, when the rabbi was dead.

AFTER THE SERVICE wrapped up, Rabinowitz got a ride home from a group of men who lived across the Key Bridge in Roslyn, Va. They dropped him off sometime

after 7 p.m. It was the last time anyone, except his murderer, would see Rabinowitz alive.

Not long after he got home, Rabinowitz got a phone call from Nat Lewin. Lewin, a well-known litigator and civil liberties expert who has argued more than two dozen cases before the Supreme Court, was the picture of a “prominent Washington lawyer” — and not just in the slightly mocking way that Rabinowitz meant when he jokingly applied the moniker to the many attorneys at Keshet Israel. Lewin was calling to tell Rabinowitz that he had to be in court the next day in New York and would miss a Jewish event in Washington that he was supposed to lead, and could Rabbi Rabinowitz fill in for him?

“Can you call me back in a little bit?” Rabinowitz responded. “I’m expecting somebody.”

Lewin was at a payphone at New York’s LaGuardia Airport after canceling his flight and decided to wait by the phone there. Half an hour later, Lewin called again. No answer. He called a second time, and a third.

“The phone rang, and the phone rang, and the phone rang, and nobody picked up,” Lewin recalled in a recent conversation. “I was very puzzled about the fact that he had said he was expecting somebody.”

Lewin eventually went back to his hotel in Manhattan, but he called the rabbi again the next morning. No answer. Later that day, after he got back to Washington and heard Rabinowitz was dead, he went to the police to tell them about his conversation with the rabbi.

“I may have been the last person he talked to,” Lewin recounted, “before he allowed a murderer into his house.”

BRUCE AND NANCY JAMES walked out of the National Theater in downtown Washington after 10 p.m., when their show ended. They decided to stop by Rabinowitz’s house before heading home for the night. The young couple needed to drop off that week’s edition of the synagogue newsletter for the rabbi to edit, like he did every week.

By the time they arrived, it was after 11 p.m. They didn’t want to bother the rabbi. They were surprised to see the lights on, but they didn’t think too much of it. Rabinowitz sometimes listened to Israeli news over a shortwave radio, and it would have been

time for the morning broadcast in Israel, where his brother lived. The couple dropped the newsletter draft in his mailbox and went home.

The next morning, after learning that the rabbi had been murdered, the couple frantically called the police, eager to give a statement after having stopped at his home the night before.

“They told us that if we pushed the door open, we would have found the body ourselves,” Bruce said.

NO ONE KNEW who the rabbi was expecting that night. But within hours of hearing about his death, congregants began to wonder who, out of the many people Rabinowitz would invite to his home, might be vengeful enough to kill him. Suspicions quickly settled on one person.

“Wild rumors, fomented by fear and without any basis in established fact, have been circulating in our community,” the *Washington Jewish Week* editorial board wrote the week after Rabinowitz was killed, already cognizant of the suspicions being cast within and outside of the community. Israeli journalists had even speculated that the murder was terrorism. “Rabbi Rabinowitz of blessed memory was the gentlest of men. Let us restrain our imaginations and await the apprehension of his assailant before we reach any conclusions.”

The *Jewish Week* editorial reflected the widespread certainty among both the Washington Jewish community and the D.C. Metropolitan Police Department that a culprit would be swiftly caught and brought to justice. In the immediate aftermath, when evidence was still being gathered, up to 20 officers were working the case. Two MPD homicide detectives worked full-time on the case for more than a year. For months, detectives asserted that they were confident they would find the killer.

Police Lt. John Harlow told Keshet board members at a meeting held at the synagogue less than a week after the murder that he was “positive” the case would be solved. The physical evidence was strong — blood, fingerprints, a hat left at the scene. The police were looking for a “disorganized killer, violent, didn’t like the rabbi,” according to notes from the meeting. “No real evidence of robbery.”

“Could the murderer be vicious,” one congregant asked at the meeting, “or another Jew?” One person who attended the meeting with the detectives even speculated that the murder could have been a case of mistaken identity: The rabbi at Adas Israel Congregation, a large Conservative synagogue in Washington’s Cleveland Park neighborhood, was named Stanley Rabinowitz.

“Maybe he got the wrong Rabinowitz,” the person questioned. The police did not seem to take this theory seriously.

Detectives quickly learned from conversations with Rabinowitz’s children and Keshet community members that he had been helping an indigent person in the area, although that fact alone was not particularly notable. “He was always inclined to do that, we hear,” Capt. Jimmy Wilson, commander of the homicide unit, said.

Investigators — and synagogue members — began to suspect the Russian.

“The rabbi had told us that weekend that he was going to drop him off the dole, because we were running out of money,” Bruce James noted. Before he died, Rabinowitz had been giving the Russian money daily.

IN THE DAYS FOLLOWING THE MURDER, the police interviewed the Russian extensively. “This scene has the markings of murder for murder itself, not for terrorism,” Harlow told Keshet members. It was a brutally violent incident, but one that was more likely personal and vindictive rather than antisemitic.

Once, MPD detectives came to the synagogue hoping to talk to the Russian. He ran away when he saw them. “They have these little tiny bathrooms [at Keshet], and three policemen went in and followed him into the bathroom,” Bruce said.

“The detectives kept yelling at him from the vestibule to confess to the murder,” recounted Reuven Eliaz, “but he outlasted them.” The Russian continued to come to Keshet regularly for a couple of weeks, until one day a group of men from the synagogue forced him to leave.

“I felt badly for him,” said Yaakov Hammer, who had been at Keshet the night Rabinowitz died. “Because I thought if the

guy is innocent, what a horrible way to treat him.”

Reuven Schlenker, who had some Russian language skills from a period when he lived in Europe, was able to talk to the Russian. Schlenker found him off-putting and even unsavory, but did not believe him to be guilty of the murder.

He was someone who “just didn’t fit into the American Jewish mentality’s idea of how you should behave and what you should be doing,” Schlenker reflected. “Some at our shul were very bourgeois, and they have no tolerance for people that are, you know, in unfortunate circumstances.”

Two years after Rabinowitz was killed, Schlenker ran into the Russian in Washington. He looked worse than Schlenker had ever seen him.

“He had hair down to his shoulders. A couple of his teeth had been knocked out. I only had \$10, but I gave it to him,” Schlenker said. “He told me he was going to Florida.”

FOR DECADES, people from Keshet would occasionally see the Russian around Washington, often turning away if they saw him at the Farragut North Metro stop or walking around downtown. More than a decade ago, Gerard Leval, a longtime Keshet member, saw the Russian, by then almost an old man, wandering around the lobby of his law firm’s office on Connecticut Avenue.

“I urged the guards to ask him to leave just out of concern that he might still be violent,” Leval recalled.

David Epstein, the synagogue’s liaison to the police, understands why so many believe that the Russian did it. “The relationship that this individual had with the rabbi suggested that he might be the person who would have the kind of anger that would lead to such a disastrous outcome,” Epstein explained.

Epstein, like many others that *Jewish Insider* interviewed, avoided outright saying the Russian’s name, while still hinting at the prevailing belief held by many in the community that he was the one who killed the rabbi. “I’m not going to speculate as to who the suspect was, because I don’t think it’s appropriate, since no one was ever charged,” Epstein said.

Because the Russian was never arrested, and because *Jewish Insider* was unable to locate him or determine if he was alive —

many Keshetites suspect that this homeless man, who was already well into middle age nearly 40 years ago, is no longer alive — *Jewish Insider* is also refraining from publishing his name.

“Those of us who are more intimately familiar [with the case] know that there’s someone out there who we suspected, but Jewish law is very specific in how you can deal with — in this whole realm. It’s very, very clear, it’s much more stringent than even common law,” said Toby Grauman, the lawyer and rabbi who oversaw Rabinowitz’s autopsy. “I’m not a criminal lawyer, but I will tell you, although there were plenty of criminal lawyers at the shul, that you bend over backwards to protect the innocent ... In Jewish law, you do a triple somersault and back to protect the innocent.”

“We all feel that sort of pain,” Grauman continued. “We think we know who he is, but there is someone there who they were never able to ... And maybe we were wrong. Who knows. Maybe we were wrong. Maybe it wasn’t him. But because of the nature of the death, and of all ironies, he was killed with what we believe was a *brit milah* knife.”

POLICE WOULD LATER SAY nothing indicated a robbery had taken place when they determined that only one item, which was not of any monetary value, was missing from the rabbi’s home. In the days after the murder, police could not find the knife the rabbi kept at home for performing ritual circumcisions.

As a point of fact, the knife used by the killer was, actually, *not* a regular kitchen knife. Police called the murder weapon “unique.” David Epstein’s wife Ellen pointed out that the police one day came to the synagogue and “asked to see a circumcision knife” when they were trying to identify a possible murder weapon. They also wanted to see a challah knife, which was longer and more serrated than a common kitchen knife. (The actual weapon was never found.)

But this, too, might just be a theory, a story Keshetites tell themselves to ease the pain. A *brit milah* knife is likely not large or sharp enough to commit the type of violence that took place in Rabinowitz’s home. Still, it was not impossible. Nothing is impossible for a community that is still in mourning after close to 40 years.

It could’ve been the Russian. He could have killed the rabbi, dropped the knife into any of the hundreds of trash cans on Washington’s streets, thrown out any bloodstained clothes — it’s easy to see.

But the evidence was not there for an arrest.

“You basically solve cases three ways: You have evidence, you have witnesses and you have confessions,” said Jim Trainum, a retired MPD officer who spent 19 years in the department’s homicide division. The Rabinowitz case had none of the three.

The collection and use of DNA evidence in forensics did not begin until a couple years after Rabinowitz’s death, and it didn’t become widespread until the late 1990s. Blood-type analysis was a common practice at the time, and there was ample blood collected at the scene — including, perhaps, the culprit’s blood. But all that could do was determine the blood type, not positively ID a potential suspect.

Later, when DNA analysis became commonplace, MPD’s cold case unit — and similar units at thousands of police departments around the world — began to reexamine physical evidence collected in crimes that occurred before the advent of DNA technology. In 2021, a Montana police department used DNA to solve a 1956 double murder. But investigators have not had the same luck in Rabinowitz’s case.

“DNA that was collected from crime scenes was stored in our warehouse in very unfavorable conditions, because the warehouse was not heated, nor was it air-conditioned,” Trainum explained. In 2018, an employee accidentally flooded the D.C. Crime Lab, causing \$27,000 in damage. It is unclear if the case file from Rabinowitz’s murder was damaged in the flood, or if MPD detectives ever even looked at the case file again in the modern DNA era.

An MPD spokesperson declined to say whether MPD detectives have re-examined the case at all. The MPD spokesperson confirmed that MPD remains in possession of the case file but would not say if it was damaged in the flood.

There is also the chance that the prevailing theory about the rabbi’s connection to the killer was wrong. What if, Trainum wondered, the rabbi had acquaintances that synagogue members

didn't know about? Or what if the assailant was not somebody he knew at all?

"You would have to consider that maybe this is a person who came up upon him as he was letting himself into the house and forced his way in, and then stuff went bad, and they attacked him and then took off," said Trainum, who joined the force in 1983 but did not work on the Rabinowitz case.

Kim Rossmo, an expert in geographic profiling and criminal investigations who is a professor of criminal justice at Texas State University, added his own caveat to the explanations coming from Keshet members. "It would be a hard case, period,

but after this time period, it's a really, really hard case," Rossmo told JI.

"These stories," Rossmo continued, "all have to be taken with a grain of salt."

WEEKS PASSED, and then months, and finally a year — two — five...

Detectives promised Rabinowitz's children and his former congregants that they were working on his case. "We have some real good clues," Det. Sgt. J.T. McCann told *The Washington Post* in May 1985. By then, the case file was more than 190 pages long. There was a reward of \$10,000 for anyone who had useful leads.

No one confessed. No one was arrested.

Every few years, Keshet congregants would reach out to the police to ask them to reopen the case. They were usually met with silence. In 2013, MPD put out a bulletin urging anyone with information on the case to come forward.

"We are still open to any tips and if anyone has any information about this case, we encourage them to submit a tip," MPD public affairs specialist Alaina Gertz told JI in a December email. She would not say whether anyone employed by the department today is working on the case. ♦

MAY 1, 2023

What Remains

TWO DAYS AFTER RABBI PHILIP RABINOWITZ'S PACKED FUNERAL AT KESHER ISRAEL CONGREGATION, SHABBAT ARRIVED AT THE GEORGETOWN SYNAGOGUE, JUST AS IT DID EVERY FRIDAY EVENING.

The weekly observance of rest and ritual would begin as soon as the sun set on Friday, only this time, the synagogue's longtime rabbi would not be there to greet it.

It is said in the Shabbat liturgy that we welcome the Sabbath in much the same way as a groom welcomes his bride when she walks down the aisle. In the *Lecha Dodi* prayer (literally, "Come, my beloved"), worshippers stand and turn toward the entrance of the room, as if they are wedding guests rising up to welcome the bride.

For the first time in more than three decades, the little Georgetown synagogue would be without its beloved spiritual leader, like a forlorn spouse who has lost a life partner. One month later it would be Passover, and then Shavuot, and eventually, in the fall, a new year, as sure a promise as

the falling of the leaves. Keshet would need to figure out how to keep the ship from capsizing without its captain.

At first, congregants filled the void. Each week, someone else from the congregation would deliver a sermon on Shabbat in a tradition that became known as the "People's Pulpit" and continues to this day.

"That's I think when people really stepped up and started becoming much more involved in the day-to-day," said Binyamin Kamilar, who spoke several times at Keshet's "People's Pulpit." He now works in tech in Israel.

But would someone be able to take over maintaining the Jewish cemetery? Who would oversee the necessary repairs to the synagogue's roof and paint over the peeling walls? Could couples still get married at the synagogue according to Jewish law — and if so, who would perform the weddings? Within three months, a search committee was formed to look for a new rabbi.

THIS IS NOT TO SAY that congregants simply moved on from Rabinowitz's murder.

A few weeks after he died, the synagogue sent a group of prominent Keshet members and other local Jewish leaders to visit Washington, D.C., Mayor Marion Barry to convey "the urgency of solving this crime," according to notes from a synagogue board meeting.

Keshet members also began to think anew about security. Two months before Rabinowitz was killed, one synagogue member presented a proposal for securing the building, but the plan was never discussed.

It would not have saved the rabbi. Still, police now felt that the need to secure the building was urgent.

One option was for men from the synagogue to take shifts standing outside, keeping watch. Some questioned whether this would constitute doing work that was forbidden on the Sabbath. Ultimately, that contingent was overruled. Several police officers now stand outside the entrance on Saturday mornings alongside a synagogue member, who determines whether each person who arrives at the door can enter the

sanctuary.

The synagogue member acting as a sentry “stands out there to make sure that people who come in are people who are looking for a synagogue and not for an occasion...” said David Epstein. He trailed off, not filling in what occasion might lead someone to be turned away.

The question of who should be allowed in has haunted Keshet since Rabinowitz died. But today, it’s not a unique quandary for modern synagogues. It’s a requisite security consideration for houses of worship.

SYNAGOGUES IN EUROPE, fearful of antisemitic attacks, have for years required Jewish visitors from overseas to register in advance and send in a photo of their passport for security purposes. A couple of miles uptown from Keshet, Washington’s Adas Israel Congregation, a large Conservative synagogue home to well over 1,000 families, requires every visitor, at any time of day, to walk through a metal detector to enter the building. (This would be impossible at Keshet, where the rules of Shabbat would not allow an electronic magnetometer to be used.)

Over the past decade or so, dozens of worshippers have been killed: at a synagogue in Pittsburgh, a Black church in Charleston, S.C., a church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, and a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisc.

Early last year, a rabbi and his congregants were held hostage at gunpoint in a Dallas-area synagogue. Miraculously, everyone emerged alive and physically unscathed after more than 10 hours trapped inside Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas. But the crushing realization that their sanctuary had been breached by an intruder intent on doing harm left an indelible psychological impact on everybody who was present.

“It is horrific that my congregants and I were held hostage in our sacred home,” Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker, who was then the rabbi at Beth Israel, said at a March 2022 Senate hearing. He detailed the moment the gunman arrived, early in the morning, while Cytron-Walker was preparing for the service. “In the midst of trying to do a million different things,” he recalled, “I had a stranger come to the door.”

Cytron-Walker paused to talk to the man,

who said he had spent the night outdoors in near-freezing temperatures and wanted a place to get warm. The rabbi served the stranger tea. In his testimony, Cytron-Walker quoted the Book of Isaiah: “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”

“Security and hospitality can go hand in hand. I was running late, but I spent time to see if there were any red flags and I did not see any. Of course, I was wrong,” said Cytron-Walker.

In the year since, Cytron-Walker has reflected at length on that moment. He did his best to make a decision that incorporated his values and the realities of modern-day antisemitism and violent extremism. He chose wrong. “I welcomed a terrorist into my congregation,” he said. “Four of us could have died and I would have been responsible.”

Cytron-Walker was testifying before the Senate at a hearing about how to combat hate crimes in America. Proposed solutions included additional training for law enforcement, millions of dollars in funds to “harden” synagogues with extra security measures and expanded education about the history of antisemitism.

Would metal detectors at Keshet have stopped Rabinowitz from building a relationship with a broken man whom he desperately wanted to help? How could antisemitism education have stopped a threat from within? Or, looked at another way, what if the security measures go too far, and a synagogue — claiming security needs — doesn’t allow a person of a certain economic class, or a certain race, to enter?

Welcoming guests is a value at the heart of the Jewish faith, regardless of the security concerns that now animate Jewish congregations. In the Book of Genesis, Abraham quickly ends a conversation with God when he sees three guests walking toward his tent. He welcomes the men, who turn out to be angels. One promises that Abraham’s wife Sarah, even in her old age, will soon bear a son.

“DID I FEEL UNSAFE? I DIDN’T,” Howard Rosen said, recalling the aftermath of Rabinowitz’s murder. “But there were people in the synagogue who did. Not unsafe on antisemitism grounds, but unsafe on unknown people. So I think some people

were a little bit more vigilant.”

The fear was different back then: more personal, the result of a deep psychic wound rather than an increasingly intense threat environment. “There wasn’t the kind of anxiety we have today, where we’re worried about potential terrorist attacks and things of that sort,” said Gerard Leval.

Overwhelmingly, Keshetites’ memory of that period was grief and sadness, not fear.

“It wasn’t a larger incident, something directed against Jews or against Keshet. It was thought to be whatever it was. It was personal. Or maybe,” said Al Moses, a longtime Keshet congregant and a former U.S. ambassador to Romania, “it was a random killing.”

Community members generally viewed the murder as “a one-off,” said Gene Fidell, who served as the treasurer of the Keshet board in the 1980s. Rabinowitz performed Fidell’s wedding to *New York Times* Supreme Court columnist Linda Greenhouse. “Many people might feel differently today, by the way,” Fidell added, “with the upsurge in antisemitic incidents. People might process it in a different way. But at the time it was just focused on him and his tragic death.”

Howard Smith, the young astrophysicist who had discovered the rabbi’s body in his study, kept going to synagogue. He liked Keshet, and besides, he felt a religious obligation to return to continue mourning his mother. “I didn’t go to shul full of fear, like, ‘Oh, there’s a psychopath here,’” he explained. “Nor did I feel that there was a wave of antisemitism sweeping through Georgetown.” Like the other Keshet congregants, Smith had his own life to return to. He was getting married that year.

Very quickly, day-to-day matters of Jewish life and the minutiae of running a nonprofit religious institution began to take up the synagogue leadership’s attention.

“There was a fierce discussion of, should we maybe not even have a rabbi?” Rosen said. “This was a community that had a bar mitzvah every decade. They didn’t have, like, lifecycle events.”

The rabbi they hired just a few months later was meant to match the changing demographics at Keshet. Rod Glogower was a young intellectual with two master’s degrees, and he was hired away from the Orthodox minyan in Ann Arbor, which drew

heavily from the University of Michigan student body.

"There was a changing of the guard," Glogower told *Jewish Insider* last year, noting that many new young people had arrived at Keshet in the years before he was hired. "Toward the end of Rabbi Rabinowitz's career there, there was perhaps a sense of — I mean, he was an older generation Orthodox rabbi in America as a part of a different milieu, and a different background, and that must have been very, very difficult for him. The idea that they hired a young rabbi who had been on campus and was a very different type of model was, I guess, indicative of that transition."

Glogower was not scared away by what happened to Rabinowitz. "The story was not that the rabbi was gunned down or attacked in the streets, like you're moving into a neighborhood where your life is in danger as you walk to shul," Glogower said. One time in his first year, the Russian man — by then, it was a widely held belief at Keshet that the Russian had killed Rabinowitz — came to services. Glogower, of course, did not recognize him.

"A group of people got together and picked him up and threw him out," he recalled.

Glogower only stayed at Keshet three years. He said it was not "the right fit for myself and my family." They missed campus life. He went back to Ann Arbor, where he has remained for 35 years.

By the time Glogower left, many of the people who had known Rabinowitz well had also departed Keshet. Some moved north to Kemp Mill, a neighborhood in Silver Spring that is sometimes jokingly referred to as Keshet North. Others left for Keshet East — Israel. Rabinowitz's daughter and son were also long gone from Washington, in Chicago and Teaneck, N.J.

SOON AFTER, it looked like Keshet had finally found peace, or at least stability. The congregation again hired a new rabbi, and he stayed at the pulpit for more than two decades. An authority on Jewish law and a widely recognized scholar, Rabbi Barry Freundel was eager to put Keshet on the map as an intellectual and spiritual hub of Modern Orthodoxy. (He later did put the synagogue on the map, but for the wrong

reasons.)

By the time Freundel arrived in 1989, the older shop owners who lived out in Maryland had mostly died or stopped coming to shul. Keshet's base became the highly educated, observant young people who were now settling in Northwest Washington.

The city was slowly beginning to change, too, by developing broader swaths of downtown and cleaning up the open-air drug markets that had populated major thoroughfares like 14th Street, which had been decimated by the 1968 riots after Martin Luther King Jr. was killed.

Jewish institutions that had left the city half a century earlier, like the JCC located a mile north of the White House on 16th Street, were moving back into the gentrifying city. In 2002, a group of Jewish real-estate developers purchased an aging synagogue located at Sixth and I streets from the Black church that had bought it 50 years earlier, when the Jewish congregation there — Adas Israel — moved uptown. Now, Sixth and I is a cross-town corollary to Keshet, a hub of religious and cultural events catering to less observant Jews.

Connecticut Sen. Joe Lieberman arrived soon after the new rabbi, along with many other political bigwigs who would make Keshet their go-to synagogue during stints in Washington. When Lieberman was Al Gore's running mate in the 2000 presidential election, national news coverage zoomed in on his Jewish faith. Freundel turned out to be adept at working the media. On Tisha B'Av in 2000, a fast day commemorating the destruction of the Second Temple, Freundel famously showed up to the prayer services in makeup. He had just come from a TV hit.

KESHER ISRAEL is a place with a surplus of history. There were first the striving merchants who started the shul and an early rabbi who ran an operation importing kosher wine during Prohibition. Then came the murdered European refugee rabbi and his long-term successor, Freundel, who would go on to spend years in prison for secretly recording women in the synagogue's ritual bath.

Almost no one speaks of Freundel anymore. But Rabinowitz's story is told to new Keshetites with reverence and affection.

Today, many of the synagogue's

congregants cycle in and out every two or three years. And yet all of them — or anyone who's attended more than a couple Shabbats — know about the leader who shepherded the congregation through the "lean years" and kept Orthodox Judaism alive in Washington. They also know that his murder remains unsolved and is likely to stay that way, when the main suspect hasn't been seen in a dozen years.

"Keshet always has been and still is an institution with an exaggerated amount of self-love," said Leon Wieseltier, the former *New Republic* literary editor who was a regular at Keshet for two decades. "When I came to Keshet in 1996, everybody told me the Rabbi Rabinowitz story, and everybody seemed to think that they knew the identity of the murderer: a disturbed Russian immigrant whom he was helping with personal charity."

"It's part of the ethos of the place, one of the legends of N and 28th Street," Wieseltier continued, "that Rabbi Rabinowitz was an exceptionally charitable man whose door was open to the needy — that he died for his kindness. I have no reason to think that this was not so."

Over time, Wieseltier became part of the legend of Keshet, too, where once it was just Herman Wouk who carried the torch of literary genius at the small congregation. He was soon joined by future ambassadors and the senator who would enter the new millennium as the first Jewish vice presidential candidate.

"The death of Rabbi Rabinowitz sort of hovered as a kind of dark cloud over the congregation," Lieberman told *JL*. "It was a mystery. Who would kill the rabbi? Obviously there were people who, periodically ... There was somebody he was counseling who they thought might have done it, who was unstable. But who knows?"

EACH YEAR, on the anniversary of Rabbi Rabinowitz's death, a group of Keshet alumni living in Israel gather at his grave at a cemetery in Beit Shemesh, a city west of Jerusalem. Last year, for the first time, the commemoration had a virtual component.

Five people showed up in person at the cemetery, and another 30 — including Rabinowitz's children, Asher and Miriam — were on Zoom. Already, Rabinowitz's grave

was covered with more than a dozen stones. (As a mourning ritual, Jews place stones on a grave, rather than leaving flowers, when visiting.)

"Anytime you come by, there's evidence that people have been here. Your parents were respected beyond the people that we knew who respected them, which is pretty incredible," said Reuven Eliaz, who was holding his phone as a camera. "When we come here, there are always multiple stones. It's not like just one person has come and put on a stone."

Some of Rabinowitz's grandchildren were on the call, and one of them, Sarah, unexpectedly unmuted herself.

"I'm the granddaughter that was born right before my grandfather was *niftar*," she said, using the Hebrew word for "passed away." "I'm named after my grandmother. And it just means so much to me."

Sarah lives in Lakewood, N.J., and works as a nurse. "I get it from my grandparents," she said, smiling. "I'm a teacher in my heart and I'm a nurse, and I hope to carry on the legacy, to carry on that legacy of caring for

people and being there for people."

Then another grandson, Yisroel, got on the line. "I never got to hear so much about my grandfather," he said. "Thank you."

Asher and Miriam sat together on Zoom, but neither said much. "With regards to remarks, I'm afraid I'm going to have to disappoint you," Asher said. "I'm just too emotional." Now in his 70s, he looks strikingly like his father. Asher began to pray. ♦