



From Twitter to 'tikkun olam'

Megan Phelps-Roper's story of redemption

Megan Phelps-Roper, then very much a member of the Westboro Baptist Church, pickets the Jewlicious festival in February 2010. (Photos: David Abitbol)

• By ARIEL DOMINIQUE HENDELMAN

Megan Phelps-Roper's story has been well documented in the press.

Her remarkable transformation from Westboro Baptist Church's poster girl for hate-fueled social media – the daughter of former WBC spokeswoman Shirley Phelps-Roper – to her and her sister's triumphant decision to leave WBC in 2012 is the stuff of journalistic heaven, famously documented in a *New Yorker* profile this past November.

The WBC of Topeka, Kansas, is often in the media spotlight – with its outrageous picketing of everything from the funerals of US soldiers to those of the young victims of the Sandy Hook elementary school shooting.

But there is a side to Phelps-Roper's story that hasn't yet been told. There was an ecosystem of Jews who played an integral role in Phelps-Roper's departure, as well as providing her with a soft place to land once she left the church. The nucleus of this ecosystem is Jewlicious founder David Abitbol.

"The whole thing started in 2009 when JTA did a list of the most influential Jews, and I was No. 2. I have about 25,000 Twitter followers," Abitbol tells *In Jerusalem*.

That same year, WBC began to focus more on the Book of Revelation, which led it to point its lens of hatred more narrowly on Jews. WBC was about to leave for New York to picket synagogues for Rosh Hashana when they found the JTA's list. Phelps-Roper's first tweet to Abitbol read, "The only good Jew is a repentant Jew." Abitbol responded by thanking her, and in his tongue-in-cheek style pointed out the timeliness of her tweet, given that it was just before Yom Kippur.

"The initial contact was not pleasant, but it became pleasant quickly, as soon as I saw that she was willing to dialogue. It turned into a friendship, despite the fact that we disagreed with each other because I'm Canadian, so I'm innately reasonable," Abitbol remarked with a hint of humor.

Thus began a Twitter relationship that would span the next three years. The two had a chance to meet in person early on in their budding relationship when WBC picketed the annual Jewlicious Festival in Long Beach, California, in February 2010. Although some people were afraid the WBC protestors might be dangerous, Abitbol remained calm and collected, even as he went out to meet Phelps-Roper while she had blood-covered Israeli and American flags tied to each leg. WBC picket signs included "Your

Rabbi Is a Whore" and "Jews Killed Jesus." Despite this, they exchanged friendly banter.

After the Jewlicious Festival, Phelps-Roper continued to send Abitbol passages from the Torah.

When it became clear to him that her understanding of the passages was colored by the English translations, he explained that she wouldn't be prone to misinterpret them if they were in the original Hebrew. Phelps-Roper decided she would learn Hebrew.

"He was sending me links to help me learn," Phelps-Roper recounts. "I was still very wary of David, though, because there was an idea in the church that you could be seduced away from the truth by a crafty deceiver. But yet, I liked him; he was funny. So we had a two-way conversation, where I was asking him questions about Judaism and he was asking me questions about our picket signs."

One of the questions Abitbol had was about a particular picket sign that read "Death Penalty for Fags." Phelps-Roper had become familiar with an argument used by many who took offense at this sign. People typically cited Jesus's famous quote "Let those among us without sin cast the first stone." Additionally, Phelps-Roper's oldest brother was born before her parents were married. It had also been pointed out that having a child out of wedlock was another sin punishable by death.

Abitbol, however, was the first to combine both arguments. "We're advocating for the government to institute the death penalty," Phelps-Roper explains. "That was the first time I realized that if you kill somebody because of sin, you completely cut off the opportunity to repent and be forgiven. It was jarring. I thought, how could we possibly be wrong about this?"

Phelps-Roper went to the elders of her church, hoping to get a sufficient answer to explain away the glaring contradiction. She did not receive one. She immediately ceased all contact with Abitbol. She also stopped holding the "Death to Fags" signs because she could no longer justify them.

Phelps-Roper attempted to compartmentalize and continue as before, but something irrevocable had happened. "If you had a thought or a feeling against any of the doctrines that they preach, then the problem is with you and not the church," she says. "But in this instance, I was willing to challenge and not just think that I wasn't spiritual enough to understand."

IT WAS this current that led Phelps-Roper to eventually leave WBC

two years later with her sister Grace, after much agonizing and soul-searching.

Abitbol did not realize the immense effect he had had. "I thought if I could just establish some kind of rapport, it would be that much harder for her to hate Jews. Maybe she would say Jews are the devil, but Dave is actually kind of chill. I never had any thought that I could turn her at all. I felt I had a responsibility to respond to the hatred she was spewing," Abitbol relates.

It was with a mix of shock and awe that Abitbol received the call from Phelps-Roper that she had in fact left WBC and all she ever knew. Abitbol encouraged the sisters to attend the upcoming Jewlicious Festival and consider speaking. Phelps-Roper thought, "How can we talk to these people who we spent so much time antagonizing?"

At that point, the sisters were staying in South Dakota, with their car packed full of all of their belongings and no plan. "They didn't want to have some PR machine take advantage of them. But I thought they would benefit from being in a Jewish environment and seeing what actual Jews were like," Abitbol recounts.

Finally, the sisters flew to California, the tickets generously paid for by Jewlicious's main donor, Allen Alevy. Incidentally, their hosts, Rabbi Yonah Bookstein and his wife, Rachel, were the butt of their "Your Rabbi Is a Whore" picket signs just three years prior.

Rachel Bookstein remembers the incredible irony: "They came to protest Jewlicious 7, and by Jewlicious 10 they were speakers who were staying at our house. They protested plenty of other things, but I think it speaks to the spirit of the Jewlicious Festival. I don't think that would have happened anywhere else."

Phelps-Roper had her reservations about speaking at the festival. "At the beginning, I was against the idea of speaking because for so many years we were saying that we had the answer and that this is how you're supposed to live. I didn't ever want to insinuate that people could learn something from us again."

But people did learn. The sisters sat hunched over while Abitbol gently coaxed them with questions about WBC and the impetus to leave it all behind. They didn't have anything prepared; they just spoke from the heart.

"We couldn't stop crying because we missed our family and felt like we had betrayed everything we came from," Phelps-Roper reveals.

Abitbol reminded them, in front of a crowd of festival attendees, that they



After a Twitter dialogue, Jewlicious founder David Abitbol and Megan had an enjoyable first meeting at that convention – even though she sported blood-covered Israeli and American flags tied to each leg.



Shirley Phelps-Roper, the sisters' mother and a former WBC spokeswoman, at the 2012 festival.



Jewlicious's primary donor, Alan Alevy (second from left), and his grandson pose with Megan and sister Grace (second from right). The sisters came to protest Jewlicious 7, but by Jewlicious 10 were flown out by Alevy as festival speakers.



After leaving the WBC, the sisters pose on a float at a gay pride parade.



Abitbol with Grace and Megan: 'They introduced so much negative energy into the world, now it was their job to introduce positive energy to balance it out.'



Despite being the butt of their 'Your rabbi is a whore' picket signs in 2012, Rabbi Yonah and Rachel Bookstein hosted the sisters when they came to California for the Jewlicious 10 festival.

were their parents' children – and in fact it was the values instilled in them by their parents, to stand up for what they believe in no matter the cost, that spurred them to leave.

"That, of course, made us cry harder," adds Phelps-Roper.

The sisters' time at the festival and with the Bookstein family was truly transformative.

"I had some feedback that was fearful. People were wondering how we could let these radicals into our home, and who knows what their real agenda is, but I gave them the benefit of the doubt and saw very quickly that they were sincere," Bookstein says.

Bookstein learned through conversations about the kind of perspective they had been given on biblical ideas and how families function. At one point, the concept of rebuke came up, which is a pivotal one in WBC ideology. The sisters felt that they had an obligation to rebuke people. Their mother taught them that if they didn't, they would be standing aside and letting them sin.

"I told them that their mother was correctly quoting a concept from the Torah," Bookstein explains. "But the idea of rebuking someone is only if they'll be able to hear it. Yelling at someone and cursing them has nothing to do with this concept; that's abuse. I was thinking that if they had read the commentary, they wouldn't have taken the passage so literally.

"There is an impoverished understanding of the Torah sometimes in Christian teachings because it's very

flat and not in the original Hebrew. Even if it is, Hebrew is such a dense, poetic and metaphoric language that it took a couple thousand years of our wisest people to unlock the meaning."

They were then introduced to another Jewish teaching, one that helped keep them afloat during this transitional and difficult period. "I told them about *tikkun olam* and how you have to right the balance of the world," Abitbol recalls. "They introduced so much negative energy into the world, so now it was their job to introduce positive energy, to balance it out."

"These girls were really confused," asserts Bookstein. "They grew up in a system that had a lot of family love but also a lot of bad ideas that are really toxic. They were trying to get out of it and do their own spiritual rehabilitation and their own ideological refiguring of the world. What an opportunity for me to be a witness to that. That door opened, and we all walked through it together."

The concept of *tikkun olam* aided the sisters in a way that allowed them to focus on doing good in the future while rectifying the past. Phelps-Roper summarizes, "When we were introduced to the idea of *tikkun olam*, that was such a huge concept. Everybody has a duty to repair the world. That resonated so strongly with us. When we were at the church, we really believed that what we were doing was good; we thought that was the definition of loving our neighbor. Obviously, the way that came out was something that most people could never understand as good. So now we

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want to be able to try and repair the world in a way that people could recognize as such."

IT IS fitting that the sisters experienced their own personal exodus just before Passover 2013. When Megan left Long Beach, Grace stayed on for another few weeks and took part in the Passover Seders with the Bookstein family.

Abitbol identifies the redemptive lessons he took away from the experience as twofold. "There was no conversion by Twitter; Twitter is just a tool. That's a lesson; the benefit of technology isn't in it itself, but in how you use it," he says.

"God hates fags' is a terrible thing to say. But we all believe in things that society teaches us could be wrong or outright harmful," Abitbol continues. "We do lots of things that are hypocritical in our daily lives. If someone pointed that out, would we have the same moral and intellectual fortitude that these two girls demonstrated? Would we be able to leave the only life we've ever known for an ideological reason?"

Phelps-Roper sums up where she is today: "To see how internally consistent the different belief systems are, and yet conflicting with one another in major ways, it seems impossible to choose another faith. I have a lot of questions about the Bible. I still read it and think about theology a lot, but I'm not a believer in God at this point.

"Grace always says that we know human beings are real and that they're worth dedicating our time and energy to, so that's our focus. We want to be good to people."