

Steve Glines

Life in a Minor Chord

I used to wonder why I wasn't Jewish, almost everyone in the building was. I asked my mother why we didn't go to temple and why we didn't have a *menorah* in the house and why our neighbors laughed at Santa Clause and why we called *Chanukah*, Christmas. I thought that maybe we came from a different country where *Chanukah* was called Christmas. I tried to imagine one word morphing linguistically into the other.

Our neighbor was named Sophie. She spoke mostly Yiddish and what English she knew my mother had taught her in our Kitchen. On the Sabbath, *Shabbos* – which I figured must have come from our word Saturday, or the other way around – Sophie would have me fetch the newspaper and her mail from the doorman and follow her around her apartment following her orders, issued mostly in Yiddish. Working for Sophie was fun, turning on lights, turning off lights, picking this or that up and placing it here or there and even turning the oven on just before I went home for supper. The final thrill of *Shabbos* was watching the blue flame of the gas stove explode just inches from my nose when I set her teapot on the stove and turned it on. I was her *Shabbos goy* and a real *mensch* she said patting me on the head. I took it as a complement and told my mother with pride that I was a *mensch* because Sophie said so. My mother would laugh and say, "You are indeed my little *mensch*." I told the doorman that I was a *mensch*, he laughed, shook his head and said, "Oy, look at him *kvelling* so much."

When I was in High School in a town known for its WASP occupants, it suddenly became fashionable to be "ethnic" and some of my school friends suddenly discovered their Jewish heritage. We formed the Yiddish Club and since I was the only one who could speak any Yiddish I was elected president. "Oy, Got in Himmel," was the only thing Sammy Silverberg at the cigar store could say when I told him. Sammy's wife, also named Sophie, rolled her eyes heavenward and gave me a free token for the pinball machine. Such is life.