

I asked Elvis for Help

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Gladys Love Presley Footstone

I wrote to Elvis not knowing if I would get an answer.

The stories are swelling daily about resurgent anti-Semitism in the U.S. and around the world. It is not that anti-Semitism has suddenly been born. It has not. It never went away. For a long time, anti-Semitism crawled under the dung heap it belonged in. The distressing thing, once again, the legitimization of the Jew as the feared and hated "other" is coming back.

Poway, Squirrel Hill, Jews being warned not to wear kippahs in Germany, Jew hatred on U.S. College Campuses posing as BDS, Louis Farrakhan, synagogues on lockdown and more, are the words and deeds of mainstream hate.

American Jewish life is squirming with extreme disquiet.

"Where have you gone, Mrs. Robinson?"

My wife and I are Elvis Presley fans. She says, there is something about his voice that is timeless. I just liked his music, a blending of Blues, Black, Southern, Country, Gospel and Rock, and Roll into a unique, freeing American sound. It was that inclusive, diversity, that originality that brought millions upon millions to love Elvis' and his music.

He is the "King" of Rock and Roll.

We enjoy watching his movies. We play his CD's in the car. One year we did the "Haj". We made the pilgrimage to Memphis to see his home, "Graceland", and drop a flower at his gravesite.

We have been to Vegas to see the great impersonator, Fat Elvis. He is a really big guy. If you close your eyes you believe Elvis is with you. While vacationing in Florida, a fun evening was with Elvis at Elwood's Dixie Bar B' Q on Atlantic Avenue in Delray Beach. Thursday evenings, Scott Ringersen squeezes himself into an Elvis outfit and sings the night way. During the day, Scott is a cop.

A few years back, we were in Washington, D.C. We went to the National Portrait Gallery to see the Elvis exhibit. In a display case, there were a series of publicity shots, a magazine or two and a book, "Schmelvis – In Search of Elvis Presley's Jewish Roots." Transfixed, we looked at each other

– you have got to be kidding! Elvis was Jewish!

Technically, under Jewish law, even if you are raised under a different path to God, if your mother's, mother and her mother, were Jewish, you are still Jewish. The Jewish identity only ends with a male born to the line.

Historian and Elvis biographer, Elaine Dundy, researched the Presley family tree. She made a shocking discovery. True, Elvis and his family were Christians for many generations. Elvis had an antecedent named Nancy Burdine. She was Jewish. She had a daughter, who had a daughter, who had a daughter, Gladys, who had Elvis. Elvis was Jewish...at least a part of him was.

Gladys never made a secret about her Jewish heritage even in the anti-Semitic environments they lived in. She was proud of it. But then she was also proud of her Native American heritage and respectful of all people of all backgrounds. She passed that message on to Elvis

She loved humanity, her faith, and her heritage. Elvis followed her and did too.

Gladys died prematurely. She was only 46.

Broken hearted, Elvis buried his mother under a beautiful memorial – a large sculpture of Jesus with his arms outspread. He designed her footstone with a Cross on one side and a Jewish Star of David on the other.

Elvis wore a Cross, a Star of David and a Chai about his neck in life. He quipped; he did not want to “miss out on Heaven due to a technicality”.

Elvis, very sadly, died prematurely in 1977. His remains and Gladys' were relocated to Graceland. Gladys' footstone, with the Star of David, was placed in storage.

The dark clouds of hate are swirling, I realized Elvis could do something good for Jews, for all Americans. I wrote to Jack Soden the Executive Director of Graceland/ Elvis Presley Enterprises. I had no idea if I would even hear back.

"Dear Mr. Soden,

My name is Jerry Klinger. I am president of the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation.

The rise of both political and social anti-Semitism would have been deeply disturbing to Elvis Presley today. He was a Christian and very aware and supportive of his Jewish heritage.

When Elvis' mother died, he had a Star of David added to her funerary monument. After Gladys' remains were moved to Graceland, the monument was placed in storage at Graceland. Elvis frequently wore a Star of David during his life. He contributed to Jewish causes and fought against anti-Semitism by his example.

May I recommend an opportunity to honor Elvis, diversity and his respect for his Jewish Heritage. Placing on display his mother's original funerary memorial with an explanation re the Star of David would do much to promote the fuller meaning of Elvis' legacy. I am sure it would be a very positive marketing point for Graceland and for Elvis Presley Enterprises.

Please let me know if I may be of further assistance.

Sincerely,
Jerry Klinger”

A few weeks later a letter came in from Graceland.

“Dear Jerry,

Thank you for your letter dated May 4, 2019. You will be pleased to know that last year the funerary monument bearing the Star of David was pulled out of Archives and placed in the Meditation Garden.

We agree with you that Elvis would be pleased to know that this important piece of his family history is back where it belongs.

Thank you for your letter and thank you for the important work you do.

Sincerely,
Jack Soden”

I had written to the “King” asking for help. The “King” was aware of the plight and had already answered. Millions of visitors to Graceland will see Gladys’ footstone. They will appreciate Elvis.

He is the “King” for a reason.