

Our Secret Crime

By Aaron Mayer Frankel

I was just sixteen when I was given the honor of co-leading the teen Yom Kippur services at Temple Hashalom. This wasn't completely out of the blue—I'd been a youth-service-leading fiend—devoted, determined—all through middle school. But the High Holidays were the big leagues. A big room. Hundreds of kids. I was nervous but excited.

Yom Kippur that year was unseasonably warm; the air conditioning in the Sandberg auditorium was out of order, and the small, high windows were sealed. Over my thick blue suit I wore a large wool *talit* the size of a bedsheet. I was definitely overdressed for the weather. I was fasting too—since an early dinner the evening before—fasting, the traditional way, the manly way; not even drinking water. My throat felt parched and my gums tacky.

But I belted out one prayer after another. I closed my eyes on the stage behind the podium so I wouldn't have to look at all of the kids standing below, praying or swaying, staring or talking—about me, about being bored, about where else they'd rather be.

The heat in the room seemed to rise with the turning of each page. By the time we reached the *T'fillah*, the central standing prayer, I felt my knees grow weak. The air burbled inside me like a pot of soup. The *talit* weighed on me like a blanket. The shakier I felt, the tighter I held on to the podium, my hands wet and slippery. I sang louder;

Aaron Mayer Frankel is the principal at Congregation Beth Israel in Munster, Indiana, where he is co-facilitating a Hebrew school merge with Temple Beth El down the block; and author, among other works, of Jerusalem Mystery (URJ Press).



"IT'S YOM KIPPUR. I CAN'T EAT."

I looked at the ceiling.

My co-leader, Jonathan Malman, introduced the *Ashamnu*, the call and response confessional that is a Yom Kippur list of the community's collective sins. I recited each sin, pounding my chest, as the congregation of high school boys and girls pounded their chests and repeated: "*The sins of arrogance, bigotry and cynicism.*" "*We all have committed offenses; together we confess these human sins.*" Suddenly the room started to spin. "*The sins of deceit, ego-tism and flattery.*" I held on to the podium, but the podium started to move.

"*Greed, injustice and jealousy.*" The lights grew bright, and then brighter. The podium started to tip. I felt myself falling backward, falling... lights... voices...

There was a bang and everything went black.

When I came to, dozens of boys and girls were standing around me.

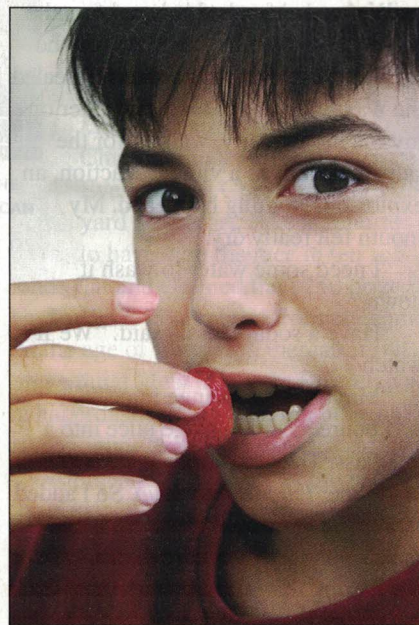
I felt odd. I had no idea what was going on.

Jonathan grabbed my hand and pulled me up. Richard Goldberg, the son of the synagogue president, took over for me in the service. Maya, Julie, Jessie, and Rochelle, four classmates

from day school two years before, volunteered to walk me home.

The morning was stunning—hot and clear, not a cloud in the sky. The cars drifted by like hovercrafts, like giant metal butterflies, wheels barely touching the ground. The walk was almost a mile though, and by the time we arrived at my house at about noon, I was even queasier.

The girls came inside to make sure I would be okay. The air inside smelled stale, like old bread. No one else was



home; we had the place to ourselves.

Maya, Rochelle, Julie, and Jessie sat down on the teal sofa in the living room. I sat across from them, on the beige love seat.

"You have a beautiful voice," Rochelle said, rubbing a finger along the marble coffee table. She glanced at her fingertip and frowned.

"Maybe you should lie down," Julie whispered. "You were unconscious for a good two minutes." ➤