

DENNIS PRAGER

by JANE ULMAN



At the age of eighteen, Dennis Prager knew exactly what he wanted to do. Sitting on his bed at his parents' home in Brooklyn, using a fountain pen filled with peacock blue ink, he wrote in his diary, "I want to devote my life to influencing people to the good."

Where did this mission come from? How would he accomplish such an enormous task? Prager didn't know. It wasn't until that moment, after a summer of earnestly imparting his ideas to his first girlfriend, that he had the confidence to write what has proved to be a life-long ambition.

Reflecting back, Prager says, "That is the ultimate motivation in my life. Always."

Just over forty years later, this tall, imposing man with a full head of silver hair hosts the *Dennis Prager Show*, a nationally syndicated daily radio talk show, and is a sought-after speaker, a gifted

teacher of Torah, and the author of four influential books. He is a deeply committed Jew, identifying only as non-Orthodox, and a political conservative. In all these roles, he remains steadfastly committed to his teenage ambition of promoting goodness and reducing evil in the world.

How does one promote goodness? How can one reduce evil? Prager approaches the task not by appealing to people's emotions, but to their sense of what's rational, of what makes sense, by challenging people to ask "Why?" and "What is right?" and by holding them accountable for their actions.

David Woznica, currently a rabbi at Los Angeles' Stephen S. Wise Temple, credits Prager with being the first to raise the issue not of *how* to be Jewish but *why*, and of having a particular ability to engage Jews on the periphery on Judaism.

That description fits Woznica's younger self, who was in his early twenties when he first met Prager. "All of the sudden this then-twenty-eight-year-old guy was challenging me intellectually to take Judaism seriously," Woznica says. "He was talking about ethics, God, and how to conduct our personal lives in ways I had never heard before."

Prager estimates he has urged tens of thousands of Jews to take Judaism seriously – to get them to commit to the religion's three tenets of God, Torah and Israel. Not all, like Woznica, have gone on to become rabbis, but they have restructured their lives around Jewish values and a belief in God.

Allen Estrin, who has become Prager's radio producer, collaborator and close friend, says Prager was the first person to introduce him to a logical reason for a belief in God and a religious life. A formerly secular Jew who once celebrated only major Jewish holidays, Estrin now regularly attends minyan on Shabbat mornings. "Dennis showed me the path to a meaningful Jewish life," he says.

Prager is a convincing speaker, but perhaps the secret to his success is his charismatic personality. People view him as their trusted friend. He's not Mr. Prager, he's Dennis. They rush up to him after lectures, for photo ops, and for both personal and theological questions. Prager is always gracious.

Underlying Prager's mission, serving as both the foundation and the catalyst, is what he deems the most important book ever written, the Torah, which he likens to an instruction manual for life.

In lectures like "Answering the Hardest Questions In the Torah," which he delivered at the 2006 UJC/Federation General Assembly in Los Angeles, Prager provides the Torah's rational and relevant answers to questions such as why God destroyed the world and why stoning was the punishment for a rebellious child. He argues that the logic of the Torah is preferable to the emotion-based morality that so many people espouse today.

The heart, he says, is the worst guide for goodness that he knows. If he followed his heart, he would rescue his drowning dog over a drowning stranger. "But the Torah teaches me that animal life and human life are not equal."

In addition to his teaching and extensive speaking engagements within the Jewish community, Prager takes the universal values of the Torah out into the greater world through his radio work and writing, integrating these values into discussions about pressing social issues and breaking news stories. Besides influencing Jews, Prager suspects he has led an even greater number of non-Jews, many conflicted or atheist, to a belief in God and to take the issue of good and evil more seriously.

One of Prager's consistent themes is the troubling consequences of secularism, with the confusion created by moral relativism topping his list. He is careful to point out, however, that he champions secular government. "America has the best values ever devised in the history of the world," he says, attributing this to the country's strong Judeo-Christian foundation.

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Prager began broadcasting on radio in 1982 on KABC-AM's weekly *Religion on the Line* program, heard locally in Southern California. Every Sunday evening, he would host clergy of different faiths, an experience that made him realize that while Jews and Christians espouse different theologies, they share many of the same basic values.

In 1999, he began hosting his own show, broadcasting from KRLA-AM in Los Angeles, and he now reaches an estimated one million listeners in 120 cities. For three hours Monday through Friday mornings, he discusses a wide range of topics, including current events and culture, religion and relationships, parenting and politics. Woven through these subjects are Prager's values, his Torah-based beliefs – among others, that people are not basically good, that God judges everyone, and that justice and liberty trump equality, meaning that you can't favor a poor person only because of his diminished financial status. Prager presents these values clearly and rationally, with humor, patience and conviction.

"*Buenos dias, buenos dias,*" Prager cheerily calls out as he hurries into the KRLA headquarters in Glendale, California, at the stroke of nine for his nine A.M. show. With one hand he maneuvers a rolling valise, in the other he holds a container of rice pudding. He's dressed professionally, as always when broadcasting, wearing a blue shirt, a yellow tie and khakis.

He quickly settles in the broadcast studio, donning earphones and tracking two computer monitors before him, and dives into the issues of the day, glancing only occasionally at a half-page of handwritten notes. His producer, Estrin, sits across from him, focused on his own laptop computer, reading breaking news stories and vetting callers.

Prager and Estrin are celebrating their fourth anniversary together on the radio show, but the two first worked together fifteen years earlier on Prager's three videos on values, *For Goodness Sake* I, II and III. Their most recent video production is the 2002 documentary, *Israel in a Time of Terror*.

Prager prefers to broadcast alone, free from distractions and able to concentrate completely on his listeners. When he interviews people, such as authors or political commentators, he does so by phone, which he says enables him to ask more penetrating questions. "I don't want to form a bond with my guests," he explains.

But he does want to form a bond with his listeners, ever challenging their thinking and behavior but never robbing them

of dignity. “Dennis changes people’s lives,” says Estrin. While such transformation is hard to quantify, Prager believes the best proof lies in the hundreds of e-mails he receives every August 2, his birthday, when he invites listeners to tell him how he has impacted their lives. This past year, he received 714 responses.

“You let me know that it’s okay to think and okay to speak up,” wrote a woman from San Diego.

“You have helped make me both a better and happier person,” a man e-mailed from Irvine, California.

“You make me happy and give me hope in a world that can be discouraging at times,” a male listener from Louisville, Kentucky wrote.

Birthdays are important to him – he believes people should be honored on their birthdays. In fact, he pays tribute to his own father, Max Prager, every year on his birthday, July 18, by interviewing him for an hour.

“People love it,” says Prager, who asks questions that allow his father to elaborate on historical and societal changes he has witnessed over his life and to expound on his philosophies.

“You must keep your sense of humor; that’s number one,” counseled the elder Prager on his most recent birthday. “You must have a wonderful attitude toward life and you have to keep busy.”

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Dennis Prager seems to have adopted his father’s advice, as well as his penchant for giving counsel. But though he earns his living speaking, as a child Prager, who was born in 1948, was a late developer in terms of speech; he didn’t begin to talk until he was three or four. He jokes that perhaps it was because he wasn’t getting paid. But as long as he can remember, even before he began speaking, he was “always thinking and feeling deeply,” and was especially affected by human suffering.

As a young child riding his tricycle near his Brooklyn home, he remembers watching a teenage neighbor carry a box of seltzer bottles up a steep stoop. When the boy dropped the box and cut

open his leg, Prager “cried like crazy.” He cried for days, inconsolable, until his mother visited the boy’s family and ascertained that he was fine.

Growing up, Prager never liked school, finding it insufferably boring. He graduated from Brooklyn College where he majored in history and Middle Eastern Studies and then did graduate work at Columbia University at the Russian Institute and the Middle East Institute, but back in junior high and high school, he rarely did homework, despite parental pressure. He prides himself on having used only one notebook for all three years of high school.

He tells people he graduated in the top eighty percent of his senior class, pausing until they understand the significance. He is essentially self-taught, though he admits his yeshiva-based education gave him great grounding in studying Torah. “I got the tools, not the answers,” he says.

Music, not academics, became his passion. He discovered music when, at age twelve, his parents limited his television watching to an hour each weekday. Prager thought taking up a musical instrument would fill the time, but knowing nothing about music, simply picked the first instrument listed in the Yellow Pages: accordion, under A. That’s the instrument he plays to this day, as well as the piano.

He was captivated by music and eager to learn. Each afternoon, save Shabbat, he traveled from Brooklyn to Manhattan’s cultural centers, especially the New York Philharmonic Library in Lincoln Center, where he studied the scores of Mozart, Haydn and other composers, teaching himself to conduct. When he turned fourteen, he had the opportunity to buy a one-dollar ticket for a chamber music concert at Carnegie Hall. “It was love at first hearing,” he says. Soon he was skipping lunch and using that money to buy more concert tickets.

But music wasn’t everything. Traveling back to Brooklyn one evening on the D Train, sitting back, his arms spanning the breadth of the bench, Prager, sixteen and in the throes of teenage angst, experienced a sudden and dramatic insight. He realized that being unhappy was taking the easy way out and that people have a moral

obligation to be happy – not only does being happy help us realize our potential, it also improves the lives of those around us by making their environment more positive.

As he explains in his 1998 bestseller, *Happiness is a Serious Problem: A Human Nature Repair Manual*, “We owe it to our husband or wife, our fellow workers, our children, our friends, indeed to everyone who comes into our lives, to be as happy as we can be.”

He has lectured on the subject worldwide, including debarking from a cruise ship in Antarctica to address an audience of penguins, the area’s sole inhabitants. This fulfilled his goal of speaking on all seven continents, though the penguins’ short attention spans limited his talk there to only five minutes. Prager currently devotes an hour a week on his radio show to happiness, which ties into his mission of reducing evil.

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Prager traces another main turning point in his life, and his genesis as a speaker, to his being sent to the Soviet Union in 1969 on behalf of the Israeli government. At the time, Prager was spending his junior year at England’s University of Leeds and had traveled to Israel during spring break. Kibbutznik friends gave his name to Israeli government officials who, because Russia had broken off diplomatic relations with Israel after the 1967 Six-Day War, needed non-Israelis to bring in Jewish items and smuggle out Jewish names. As someone who spoke Russian, Hebrew and English and was knowledgeable about Judaism, Prager appeared sent by central casting.

In Moscow, Leningrad and Baku, Azerbaijan, for three and a half weeks he met with Soviet Jews, climbing over walls and rendezvousing clandestinely in parks, “at the fourth tree,” for example, where they would then walk to avoid being overheard. The *refuseniks* told him “make a lot of *shum*,” or noise, about their plight, convinced that diplomacy was not effective.

The stories were staggering, and when he returned to the U.S., he found himself in demand as a speaker three and four times

a week, in living rooms and synagogue sanctuaries, primarily in New York, Connecticut and New Jersey.

The experience jumpstarted a career that has made him a popular speaker on both Jewish and non-Jewish themes and led to the publication of his first book, the *Eight Questions People Ask about Judaism*, co-authored with his childhood friend Joseph Telushkin. Since its publication in 1975, it has been updated to *Nine Questions*, translated into Russian, Hebrew, Spanish and other languages, and is widely used in Introduction to Judaism classes.

Prager originally wrote the book to answer questions people invariably asked him after lectures. Writing has also helped him answer his own questions. When he doesn't understand something, he obsesses over it until he arrives at an answer – writing helps with this, he says, as does his innate ability to self-teach. “Writing is the mirror of the mind,” he says, explaining that it is a crucial tool in clarifying his thinking.

That's essentially why he penned his second book (also with Telushkin), *Why the Jews? The Reason for Antisemitism*, published in 1983, as well as the seventeen-thousand-word essay “Judaism, Homosexuality and Civilization,” originally published in 1990 in his *Ultimate Issues* newsletter.

The next step in Prager's budding career was in 1976, when he became director of the Brandeis Institute in Simi Valley, California. For two years previously, he had been a frequent guest lecturer at the Institute, a Jewish camp and conference center, later renamed the Brandeis-Bardin Institute and now part of American Jewish University. When the Institute's seventy-six-year-old founder, Shlomo Bardin, decided to step down, he handed over the Institute's reins to Prager, then only twenty-six, believing that Prager shared his non-denominational and morally charged approach to bringing Judaism to people. Bardin died the following week, and Prager remained as director until 1983, overseeing the collegiate and adult programming.

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Though Prager is deeply religious, he abandoned Orthodoxy the

day after his bar mitzvah. The reason? “*Yom Tov Sheini*,” he tells people, referring to the second day added to most Jewish holidays in the Diaspora because of uncertainty over timing during biblical times. With modern calendars, he finds this illogical. “I cannot be an irrational believing Jew,” he says, convinced that rabbinic law must change.

Shabbat has always been a “big deal” in the Prager home, a spiritually joyous celebration with family and friends, a time when Prager plays only Jewish music on his Clavinova, a modern digital piano, including the Chasidic *Moshiach* song. Prager celebrates Shabbat in a meaningful, albeit rational way, observing all Torah-based laws. He drives to synagogue and will use the telephone to wish someone “Shabbat Shalom,” but he won’t use the computer, watch television, or even read newspapers, as he equates them with work.

“It’s not electricity. It’s what electricity is used for,” he has explained to his children. He’s also told them that he doesn’t care what Jewish denomination they each follow, only that they be serious Jews.

One Shabbat each month, Prager speaks at the Persian Neshah Synagogue in Beverly Hills. Even more frequently he teaches Torah – the only non-rabbi to do so – at the Mountaintop Minyan at Stephen S. Wise Temple. It’s there that he stores his accordion, playing and leading *z’mirot*, or religious songs, after lunch.

Prager’s career continues to encompass the radio show, frequent lectures and teaching, and a busy writing schedule. Looking forward, he plans for more of the same, with many goals still to be met.

For the past fifteen years, he has taught a Torah class at American Jewish University, formerly the University of Judaism, an academic and cultural institution founded in 1974, going verse by verse through all the books. His recorded lectures on the books – two hundred to date – are being edited into a printed commentary by friends and project coordinators Joel Alpersen and Barry Wolfe, with eventual plans for publication. “It’s accessible and it’s compelling,” says Alpersen, referring to Prager’s use of clear, understandable language and his ability not only to relate to people’s modern lives but also to elevate them.

Prager's writing includes a weekly column for Creators Syndicate as well as less frequent columns for *Moment* magazine and other media. He is also working on several books simultaneously, including one making the rational case for belief in God and the superiority of Judeo-Christian values, and another explaining men's sexual nature, a topic he contends "men are embarrassed to talk about and women fear hearing about" – but his talks on the topic have saved many marriages, according to e-mails he has received.

These thankful e-mails are doubtless gratifying to Prager who, despite being twice divorced, believes that marriage is the ideal state. He sees this as ironic, though not contradictory, explaining that there are myriad reasons, not discernible by outsiders, why a marriage dissolves. "Divorce is terrible," he says, "but a bad marriage can be worse."

Someday he hopes to write an autobiography entitled *A Man, a Jew, an American*, which he considers his three identities. Being a father is another fundamental identity, and Prager is devoted to his three children. His younger son, Aaron, lives with him, and he remains in close contact with his older son, David, who resides in New York, and with his stepdaughter, Anya, whom he considers his daughter.

Prager, who hopes to live long enough to accomplish everything on his ever-growing mental to-do list, sees himself as intentionally doing Jewish work in all his endeavors. Despite his diverse audience and broad appeal, Jews in the know feel he is achieving this. "You do a *Kiddush Hashem* with your radio show," they write. "You sanctify God's name."

"That's the greatest *mitzvah* a Jew can do," Prager says.