

# ROBERT POLLACK

by HARVEY SIMON



**R**obert Pollack's parents were adamant. They were Communists, proud atheists, and no son of theirs was going to have a bar mitzvah. The boy's grandparents – observant, Orthodox Jews – demanded that the tradition go on. The result was the uniquely American compromise known as the “quickie bar mitzvah.” In place of years of Hebrew School, young Robert took a crash course in reading the Torah phonetically.

“I didn't know what the hell I was doing,” says Pollack, recounting his coming of age in the early 1950s amid an intergenerational tug-of-war. Pulled one way by parents and another by grandparents, it would be many years before he fully chose his own path.

From this crucible, Pollack, now in his late fifties, emerged as a renowned molecular biologist who, in recent years, has become a deeply religious man. His embrace of Orthodox Judaism has led

to a new career path in which he's stepped out of the science lab to explore the connections between religion and science.

And he's helping others do the same. In addition to his many articles and award-winning books that investigate the nexus of religion and science, including *The Faith of Biology and the Biology of Faith* (2000), he is founder and director of Columbia University's Center for the Study of Science and Religion (cssr). The cssr is an interdisciplinary initiative dedicated to examining the juxtaposition of scientific and religious beliefs. Pollack describes the cssr as "an experiment in being religious and dealing with nature."

Not quite what you would expect from your typical biology professor – and Pollack's scientific credentials are impeccable. Born in 1940, he has spent thirty years as a biology professor at Columbia and was the dean of Columbia College from 1982–1989. He's the author of more than one hundred research papers on the oncogenic phenotype of mammalian cells in culture. He's also held a Guggenheim Fellowship and put in time as a research scientist at the Weizmann Institute and at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, as an assistant professor of pathology at NYU Medical Center, and as an associate professor of microbiology at the State University of New York at Stonybrook.

But Pollack isn't typical. He is also a lecturer at the Center for Psychoanalytic Training and Research, an adjunct professor for science and religion at Union Theological Seminary, and an adjunct professor of religion. And then there's the cssr, which he founded in 1999, five years after he decided to step out of the lab and concentrate on inquiries at the junction of science and religion, and after he and his wife, Amy, decided in the early 1990s to become observant Jews.

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Columbia University has been Pollack's home, literally, intellectually and professionally, almost since the day in 1957 when he traveled across town, from Coney Island in lower Brooklyn to the Upper West Side, for his first classes as a freshman. At Columbia, Pollack

became an accidental scientist. The Soviet Union had won the opening round of the space race with the launch of Sputnik and the U.S. began training a new generation of scientists. If Pollack, who had perfect college-board test scores, would study physics, New York State would pay his way with a Regents Scholarship.

Columbia's physics instructors trained Pollack to ask probing questions – something his devoutly Communist parents didn't welcome. Asking questions was "intrinsically subversive" in his household because it challenged the fundamental assumption that Communism was the one true path. "I grew up in a household whose religion was Marxism, not Judaism," says Pollack.

It was a household absent of doubt, a household of great certainty. That certainty gradually, perhaps subconsciously, steered him toward Judaism. Questions of certainty and choice would become a theme Pollack would later explore more deeply, after becoming Orthodox. No Jew, Pollack believes, can be content only with what he knows for certain. Running through Jewish texts, he says, is a "rich vein" that concedes the difficulty of obtaining certainty "and the obligation to live properly despite uncertainty."

Pollack's path toward Orthodox Judaism is not a linear narrative. "I don't think there's a straight line of greater observance, but there is episodic going from rock to rock in the river, where each rock in the river represents a different way to be Jewish and more engaged," he says.

The next rock was marriage. He met Amy during his senior year at Columbia. She, too, came from a non-observant Jewish family. Her parents were "afraid of being too Jewish and afraid of being noticed – the usual burden of living in a large Christian world if you're not really tough," he says.

Together these two offspring of Jews without religion decided to have an Orthodox wedding ceremony. They insisted that the rabbi from his grandfather's shul perform the ceremony – despite his parents' objections. "We both had the sense, if we were going to do this we were going to do it right," he explains, which for them meant in accordance with the traditions of Jewish law.

Their choice might seem surprising, but Pollack saw himself and his wife re-enacting the choices Jews through the ages had to make between continuing to practice their religion and blending into Christian society. By choosing an Orthodox wedding, they were “doing a reconstruction in our lives of the continuity that was broken by our parents.” The ceremony also expressed an inner religious feeling that had found no outlet. “I don’t think we were ever non-observant Jews, I think we were deeply religious people who were not given any context for it until we made [that context] ourselves,” he says.

After receiving his PhD in biology from Brandeis University, Pollack returned to Columbia to teach and to do research. He began writing extensively about molecular biology, including the findings of the research lab he headed at the school for many years, where his work examined the genetic development of cancer cells. Soon, he was receiving commendations and awards for his work.

At the same time, Pollack was becoming something of an anomaly to his fellow biologists. He believed that science should be part of the core curriculum for the school’s undergraduates, along with courses in the humanities. His colleagues, by contrast, thought they would be wasting their time teaching science to students destined to become art historians or lawyers. “I was known in the university as a bit of a ‘nutter’ for that reason,” he says.

But those outlying beliefs about education gave him just the right qualifications, as the university president saw it, to lead Columbia College. And so it was that in 1982 Pollack became the first Jewish dean of an Ivy League school. “When I was given the chance to become dean, I grabbed it,” he says. It gave him the opportunity “to serve kids, not my own career.”

His major accomplishments from those years are two campus buildings that now face one another across 115th Street. One is a four hundred-bed undergraduate residence hall; the other is the six-story Hillel Center. The dormitory was part of Pollack’s decision to make Columbia College co-ed, which increased the size of the school. The university leadership was content to accept the extra

tuition and have New York City students live at home. But Pollack fought hard for the principle that all students should be allowed to live on campus.

The Hillel Center also faced strong resistance, in this case from those who believed that “Jews have enough stuff here already,” as one university official insisted, although just a generation before, a quota limited the number of Jews who could attend. “Columbia, like most Ivy League schools, was a place in which the Jewish chaplain kept you functional in Jewish ritual but you understood you were at a place, but not of a place, if you were Jewish,” says Pollack, who had virtually no Jewish life as an undergraduate.

Today Columbia is considered one of the best Ivy League schools for Orthodox Jewish students, according to Simon Klarfeld, who directs the Robert K. Kraft Family Center for Jewish Student Life, as the Hillel Center is known. Klarfeld was hired in 2004, when Pollack was president of Hillel’s board of directors, where he still serves as a member.

“Anything that is Jewish on campus, Hillel is responsible for. So we are ‘the synagogue,’ we are the community center, we are the cultural center, we are the advocacy organization, we are the welfare, we offer counseling services to students,” Klarfeld says.

Working at the heart of Jewish life on the Columbia campus, Klarfeld is in a unique position to understand Pollack’s influence at the school: “He’s an incredibly magnetic, charismatic lover of people and lover of engaging people in intellectual and social ideas – an extrovert in the best and truest sense of the word. He gives a huge amount of energy to people and I think he gets an enormous amount of energy and excitement from sharing ideas with others.”

Much of that sharing of ideas is facilitated through the CSSR. With offices in Columbia’s Department of Biological Sciences and the nearby Union Theological Seminary, the CSSR is an institutional home for people of all faiths who are navigating the crosscurrents that some believe make it impossible to reconcile the scientific method with God. The CSSR sponsors seminars such as: “Blame it on the

Genes? The Challenge of Behavioral Genetics and Free Will,” “Evolution, DNA and the Soul: A Week-Long Seminar for Religious Leaders,” and joint seminars with Hillel including “Dignity of Life at the End of Life; Jewish Medical, Religious, Legal and Personal Perspectives,” in which the speakers included seven rabbis (one with a law degree and a doctorate) and four medical doctors.

“Bob integrates these issues constantly,” says Klarfeld, adding that combining matters of “the head and the heart” in this way “can be incredibly rich for the participants,” though it is rarely seen in university settings.

Another rarity is Pollack’s decision to teach at the Union Theological Seminary, which is unaffiliated with the university – he is the only scientist teaching at a seminary, he says. At the seminary, he serves as adjunct professor of science and religion and teaches the course “DNA, Evolution and the Soul.” “My contribution is the contribution of nature to the Christian study of Christian ethics,” he explains.

Students in his seminary class describe Pollack as “magnanimous” and “wildly lucid.” One student says, “Sitting next to him I feel I’m in the presence of greatness.” There is no disagreement around the seminar table when, in their professor’s absence, a student states, “It’s a truly remarkable class.”

During one class session, Pollack speaks of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor and theologian who was part of the German resistance during World War II and helped Jews escape to Switzerland. He died in a Nazi concentration camp in 1945. “I am so drawn to the life of this Christian German pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, because in his actions he was neither a friend nor an enemy of Jews – he knew none,” Pollack says. “In his actions, he was a serious Christian and accepted that his religion demanded that he say ‘no’ to acts that were wrong in religious terms and demanded that he act at his own risk, that he do things that were necessary in religious terms. In a country of one hundred million people, the Germans can’t show you two more Bonhoeffers. So what he proves by his existence is it’s possible – and it’s very difficult – to live according to a religion.”

At the center of Pollack’s discussions with his students, at the

seminary and elsewhere, is the idea that biology demonstrates that people have the freedom to make choices for themselves and that religion can provide guideposts for some of the most important of those decisions.

“Darwin’s explanation, borne out by science, permits free will and therefore makes all ethical questions important rather than pre-determined,” Pollack explains. “If you know that you act by your DNA, or if you know that you act by birth according to grace, then there are no choices left. But Jews have choices. And it’s my understanding that nothing in founding Christian texts excludes choices either. In fact, I would say a religion by definition is an attempt to help with the burden of choices.”

Pollack sees no contradiction between teaching divinity students at a seminary one day and biology students at Columbia the next. Nor does he see an inconsistency between his morning prayers at shul and his science classes. At Columbia, he says, “I say what I do know; [at shul] I say what I don’t know.” The two “are complementary parts of a whole life.”

Science, he says, “does not have the capacity to say anything, except when cast in the form of a test that has the capacity to show the idea is false.” So the atheist’s argument that an all-powerful God would violate known laws of nature cannot be tested. “What is the test of the idea that Heaven can breach nature? How could one disprove the idea?” Pollack asks. But then he seems to take off his scientist’s cap and put on his *kippah* to ask, “Who is a creation to measure its Creator’s capacities anyway?”

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By the early 1990s, Pollack had completed his tenure as dean and returned to running his lab at Columbia, but he was growing restless and was approaching another of those rocks in the river.

Something was missing in his life. Running a research lab at one of the world’s top universities is a competitive business requiring raising money and being the first to make the next breakthrough. He was beginning to wonder if he ran the lab or the lab ran him.

At the same time Pollack felt he had been deprived of “an ancestral gift” and wanted to restore the connection with Judaism that his parents had severed. Yet he was plagued by the feeling that to be observant would be to disobey his parents, explaining, “I didn’t have it in the past, my parents were nuts, I might put the shul at risk in some irrational way. Why would I be in shul? They basically raised me to be not Jewish, so why would I override them?”

Despite these feelings, the pull towards observance was strong. Some of his earliest memories were of the ID numbers tattooed on the arms of Holocaust survivors who had come to the U.S. after the war and, in his fifties now, he was struggling to come to terms with this tragedy that had killed many members of his family who had not emigrated.

The scope of his scientific knowledge also pushed him towards religion, as he describes in an interview with the website, Slate.com:

I changed my mind about how I want to live in the world... my choice to become active in...Judaism was a choice driven by a closer appreciation of the facts of the world as I understood them through the data on natural selection...It is the meaninglessness and purposelessness and absence of directionality and absence of perfectibility in the mechanism of natural selection, which I find frankly unbearable...and so I felt freed by my free will...to behave irrationally and to accept the religion of my ancestors.

Still, even after the deaths of his parents, even after he became increasingly observant, and even after he decided to leave the lab to concentrate more on the connection between science and religion, he continued to struggle with the notion that in becoming more observant he was dishonoring his parents.

It was his good luck to meet Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, a “once-in-a-millennium scholar,” according to *Time* magazine, perhaps best

known for his translation of and commentary on the Talmud. The two became unlikely friends while the rabbi was a visiting scholar at Columbia. Eventually, Pollack asked Steinsaltz “the biggest question I had, which was, ‘How do I deal with my crazy parents?’ I mentioned that my father was a Communist and a difficult person, not just not observant but actually hostile to the idea of Judaism. And I asked, ‘How do I honor that and still feel comfortable as a Jew? How can you honor your mother and father when they are dishonorable?’”

His question was voiced not just to Steinsaltz, but was posed in front of five hundred guests at a fundraising dinner at which Steinsaltz was the star attraction. The answer had a profound effect on Pollack, who recalls Steinsaltz’s reply: “The way you honor your parents is by being a serious Jew. And having other people say such a serious Jew must have had interesting parents. Forget the past, don’t change it, don’t convince them, don’t argue with them, live a Jewish life, and that is how you honor them.”

However, it wasn’t Steinsaltz’s answer alone that helped free Pollack to fully embrace Judaism. After Steinsaltz spoke, an old man at the dinner approached Pollack, hugged him, and said, “In 1941, I was with my father whom I adored, and we were taken to a camp and a German soldier said to me, ‘Go that way’ and said to my father, ‘Go this way.’ And my father said, ‘No, come with me.’ And I followed the commandant’s instructions, instead of my father’s and he’s dead and I’m alive. From that moment until [I heard] the rabbi tonight I always felt guilty for not obeying my father.”

When Pollack told Steinsaltz this story, the rabbi “looks at me and he doesn’t skip a beat, he says, ‘That’s why we’re here tonight. Not for you, not for me, but for him. The old man.’”

At that moment Pollack understood that “the measure of our success in Jewish terms” is that “together we could take a man who’s suffered for sixty years and take it off him while he’s still alive – and not knowing we’re doing that. That’s the point. The measure of good action in Jewish terms does not require knowing the outcome. It requires acting well and then finding out or not finding out. You don’t wait for the answer,” Pollack says.

By 1999, Pollack had established the CSSR and was completing work on *The Faith of Biology and the Biology of Faith*. “I said to myself as a husband, father, grandfather and Jew, what are the questions I want to study using the intellectual part of my life, the academic part of my life? And those are questions at the junction of science and religion,” Pollack says. He also wanted to teach young people, by his own example, the importance of doing something for other people.

Underpinning these changes was a full-fledged, unapologetic commitment to Orthodox worship. “I couldn’t have set up the CSSR if I wasn’t going to shul myself. It wouldn’t make any sense. Because what would I mean by religion if I had no religion myself?”

Though religious belief is not a prerequisite for those associated with the center, Pollack says there is no one there “for whom religion is a waste of time. I don’t ask people to show me their religion at the door, but my sense is you wouldn’t bother if you didn’t think something about your own religious life as being important.”

Pollack and his wife stopped working on the Sabbath and joined Congregation Ramath Orah, an Orthodox synagogue near Columbia, where he’s a regular, active member. “I chose a place which links itself most completely to the history and the tradition of religious observance by Jews in the world, despite oppression. I chose the maximum link of continuity, despite my parents,” he says. “I need to be Orthodox, I need not to negotiate whether this is too Jewish or not.”