

Review of Counterculture Crossover: Growing Up in the Love Family by Rachel Israel

By Kathy Harrigan

January 14, 2019

Escaping society's expectations and abandoning a young marriage, Rachel Israel's mother embraced the spirit of the counterculture revolution that began in the late 1960s. Searching for a meaningful life of self-sufficiency and adventure with her two year old daughter in tow, by the time they arrived at the Front Door Inn at Seattle's Love Israel Family compound four years later, they had already been on a remarkable odyssey. Lois, six years old at this point, had acquired an infant brother and had been forced by her circumstances to develop a broad set of practical life and social skills uncommon in one so young. Soon to be assigned the new biblical name of Rachel, she and her mother had initially left Seattle for an isolated paradise in Hawaii where they subsisted on a pristine beach, often sleeping in a tent; here their neighbors were other travelers--nudists, idealists, and drop-outs. As locals ousted these vagabonds, mother and daughter hitchhiked the AlCan Highway into primitive areas of Alaska, visiting communes, making a life in the wilderness, and living for a time in a tipi. Her mother's chance meeting in a Homer, Alaska, bar with a man called Love Israel resulted in their return to Seattle, the dissolution of the close relationship between mother and daughter, and eight years of immersion in Love's highly controlled religious commune.

One can argue that Rachel's mother took risks with her children's well-being as well as her own, but she was also a model of courage and resourcefulness at a time when women had fewer choices. One can also argue that these same traits were evident in her daughter who managed to cope with what felt like parental abandonment as well as the blatant devalued status of females and children in the Love Israel Family. That Rachel's mother chose to eventually join the restrictive commune and knowingly give up her autonomy as well as parenting rights to this highly structured, patriarchal group, is a paradox that the author repeatedly ponders. Rachel, like others whose parents became members or were shunned, banned, or had disappeared, lived with non-biologically related householders, no longer with her mother.

Seattlites in the late 1960s through the mid 1980s likely remember the long haired, robed men and lithe, flowing skirted women who moved in groups, perhaps at citywide events; a gaggle of well behaved children in bright ethnic clothing often accompanied them--the Love Israel Family or, more often called the Love Family. Always polite and pleasant but emotionally distant, members appeared to live an almost monastic life on Queen Anne Hill where they cooperatively owned small businesses and a compound of colorful homes with bountiful gardens that connected their yards. The Love Family was also well known in Arlington, Washington, north of Seattle where funds from a wealthy member purchased a 300+ acre ranch. Members operated the "The Bistro," a popular restaurant, and invited the community to their annual Garlic Festival. Here, living first in tents and then in yurts with outhouses, members tended vegetable gardens and raised animals. Over time about 600 people belonged to the group. Of these, over 200 were children, many born into the commune. The Love Family was a local curiosity. It was also under national scrutiny because Logic Israel was son of television personality Steve Allen, comedian, scientific skeptic, then the much loved host of the popular Tonight Show.

Rumors about the Love Family abounded, some of them true. Members shared a surname, that of their leader--Israel. Birth names were dropped in favor of assigned biblical or virtue names like Logic, Serious, Honesty, or Fresh. Stories about drug overdoses and the

use of illegal drugs emerged—two young men died from huffing toluene as a sacrament in 1972. Marijuana was a daily adult spiritual practice. LSD figured into a rights of passage and religious experiences. Though some marriages were polygamous, lore about free-love orgies was not true; in fact celibacy was a requirement for new members and others, and men and women tended to think of each other more as brothers and sisters than as sex partners. And that is how the children saw each other as well, making the demise of the Love Family heart wrenching for many. Only in later years did sexual predation become a concern for young females.

The derogatory application of the term “cult” was not in common usage when The Love Israel Family began. However, from the author’s description of everyday life, the leader, Love Israel, used coercive persuasion techniques, unconsciously or not, to recruit, control, and grasp the loyalty of members. As Rachel Israel describes her experiences and observations, one can easily check off the classic criteria for mind control techniques. Written works by researchers in the field such as Jay Lifton, Steven Hassan, and Margaret Singer would likely agree that Love Israel Family members were manipulated in all the usual ways. Their access to information was limited; their thinking was controlled; their emotions and behavior were monitored and limited; their identities were tied to the socially isolated group. Ms. Israel provides multiple examples in each category. Avoiding former friends and family, members were admonished to travel in pairs, to marry assigned partners, to give up pre-membership spouses, to live in assigned households. They divested of all material goods and money, giving them to the leader for whom they also worked. Doctrine required members to reject conventional medical intervention, to accept Love Israel as the literal voice of Jesus, and to see the Love Family as God’s chosen people. They shared a group language and concepts not understood by outsiders; they took the same last name and were assigned first names that related to the leader’s values. Forbidden to speak of their pasts, members had no pre-membership identities. To question the leader was to invite rebuke, loss of status, or dismissal.

Despite these conditions, author Rachel Israel, who holds an MS in Psychology and a BA in Sociology, does not believe that the adults in the group were brainwashed. She asserts that each made an on-going, deliberate choice to participate; they opted to remain under what many recognized as Love’s micromanaging control. Of course, children born into the group had no option or point of comparison. Though her own childhood often lacked joy, and she was required to be ever-mindful of her thoughts, Rachel’s days with the Love Family were not always a torment. Precocious and insightful journal entries that she wrote throughout her childhood helped her construct a timeline as well as the intimate details of her story. They show that she gained life skills and an introspective depth that peers in the larger society often lacked. After all, she had helped midwife babies, tend gardens, glean crops, live without modern plumbing, participate in cultural events, and listen respectfully for hours at a time to a leader thought to be close to God. She owned nothing and expected little for herself. In her early teens she took a sacrament as a rite of passage; three hits of LSD allowed her to experience a sense of oneness of all. Life was serious business to Rachel. She found the larger culture foreign and sometimes incomprehensibly hostile as she transitioned into it.

The author’s direct and steady voice comes both from a morally neutral, down to earth child’s point of view and from a broader, educated, adult perspective. In both cases she is objective and never bitter. Honest yet careful, Rachel Israel is generally empathetic with former family members, recalling childhood peers with fondness. Once in a while she steps out of her personal story to give the reader a third perspective—an historical comparison of the Love Israel Family to other utopian communities from the past, the Oneida Community in

particular. Obvious parallels exist. The Oneida group survived longer than most other American communal orders of the time. Founded by a male, it persisted from the 1840s into the 1880s and was based in Christianity. Polygamy was endorsed and women did not necessarily care for their own children.

I am impressed with young Rachel Israel's astute perceptions of flaws in people, pitfalls in relationships, and dysfunction in systems--factors that had the potential for harming her or others she loved. I am also impressed with her resiliency, at least in part a result of her ability to adroitly and frequently assess and then navigate new or unusual situations, a strength she developed from an early age.

Counterculture Crossover: Growing Up in the Love Family has much in common with recent biographies about patriarchy and polygamy written by former FLDS members such as Carolyn Jessop's Escape. It has similarities to books about second generation membership in larger sects: Beyond Belief by Jenna Miscavige Hill and Born Into the Children of God by Natasha Tormey come to mind. However, Rachel Israel writes with less resentment and a broader historical background. Parts of her story reminds me of North of Normal, by Cea Sunshine Person, raised by eccentrics in the wilderness of Alberta, Canada. In fact, Rachel's prickly relationship with her mother and then with a father she finally met and lived with after leaving the Love Family, recall moments from dysfunctional family memoirs like The Glass Castle by Jeannette Walls and Liar's Club by Mary Carr. One wants to both laugh and scream.

Counterculture Crossover: Growing Up in the Love Family is a lengthy, honest memoir that focuses on the eight years Rachel Israel lived in the Love Family. While much of the story is about the day to day experiences of a girl living by her wits, the book in many ways is about the zeitgeist of the counterculture movement of the 1960s-70s and how the Love Israel Family existed in an everchanging social milieu, not unlike other utopian experiments from earlier in history. It is also over-archingly about how the human desires for belonging, recognition, and meaning are too easily manipulated by unscrupulous and savvy individuals for their own benefit.