



Indiana Jew: Josh Bernstein is "Digging for the Truth"
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Josh Bernstein is "Digging for the Truth."
(PHOTO: Brendan Goeckel © Josh Bernstein)

Josh Bernstein, the wide-brim hat-wearing, khaki-clad host of *The History Channel*'s hit television show "Digging for the Truth," is chastising me. Skeptical, I am questioning the likelihood of a Manhattan-bred, Conservative Jew's expertise in outdoor survival.

"You know, at one point, we were all competent wilderness travelers," he says good-naturedly. "I just reverted to an old-school Jewish lifestyle."

But these days his lifestyle is quite hectic. On this Friday afternoon in New York, Bernstein, 35, has some rare down time. Having recently completed the eight-month-long shoot of the DFT's third season, he is gearing up for a book tour.

In his new book, *Digging for the Truth: One Man's Epic Adventure Exploring the World's Greatest Archaeological Mysteries*, Bernstein goes behind-the-scenes, sharing "so much more than what you see during the 47 minutes of the show." In it, he also dispenses practical adventure advice. Like for those inclined to build shelter in the snow, he provides instruction on "How to Build a *Quinzhee*." And lest anyone think his globe-trotting job is all-glamour, Bernstein even writes about his lack of sleep, the itchy spider bites and the strange intestinal parasites he has picked up on location.

So while his televised search for archeological adventure has brought comparisons to the movie hero "Indiana Jones," his real-life story is more wandering Jew.

Born and raised in New York City, his fascination with travel, adventure and history were fostered early on. He attended the elite Horace Mann School, went to summer camp in New Hampshire and Antigua and attended Hebrew school at Park Avenue Synagogue - though only until his bar mitzvah.

“I think that was the goal,” he says sheepishly, before confirming the end of his early Jewish education with his twin brother, Andy.

But perhaps the most pivotal, life-changing event happened six weeks before his 15th birthday with the sudden death of his Israeli-born father. The following year, his three-year-old sister was killed in a car accident.

These personal tragedies sent Bernstein on what he describes as a “tailspin of disconnect from Horace Mann.” Or rather the hyper-materialistic lifestyle of some of his classmates.

Instead, the grieving teenager headed to Cody, Wyoming where he learned to ride horses, build log cabins and appreciate the American West. He also became well-acquainted with the school that would define him for the next 18 years: the Boulder Outdoor Survival School or BOSS.

With its “Know more, carry less” philosophy of a sustainable lifestyle, the influence of BOSS was profound. Bernstein became proficient in fending for himself: in the wilderness and in life.

After graduating from Horace Mann in 1989, he attended Cornell University double majoring in anthropology and psychology and double minoring in Native American and Near Eastern Studies.

Bernstein also found time to be a two-term president of his fraternity and president of a Greek Honor Society. Today, he is still in touch with his fraternity brothers, who, he laughingly admits, “watch the show and give me crap about it.”

At the end of his senior year at Cornell, Bernstein asked a professor where he could study Judaica just for learning’s sake. The professor told him about the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem.

“I asked ‘What’s that?’” he recalls. “And he said ‘It’s where people come to ask big questions about Judaism.’”

Soon after, Bernstein was off to Jerusalem. At Pardes, he sometimes spent 12 hours a day delving into ancient Jewish texts. So satisfying was the experience, when his year of study was up, Bernstein paid a visit to the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York to see if rabbinical school might be his next move.

“But the fluorescent lights ruined it for me,” he explains. “I told the rabbis at Pardes I’m going to get my wisdom in the desert.” Their reply: “It was good enough for the Patriarchs.”

Bernstein moved to Colorado and persuaded BOSS's then-owner to take him on as an unpaid marketing director. In time, his entrepreneurial flair and knack for vertical integration paid off. By 26, he was BOSS's president, C.E.O. and chief media spokesperson.

Charming, yet guarded, Bernstein is most animated when discussing the upcoming third season of "Digging for the Truth" set to debut with a two-hour premier on Monday, January 22 at 9:00 p.m. EST/ 8:00 p.m. CST.

"We've really outdone ourselves this time. I think we found our stride," he says.

Viewers can look forward to two episodes on topics of biblical interest. "The Lost Treasures of the Copper Scroll" and "Search for King David" will air later this season.

"We went everywhere [in Israel], from Kiryat Shemona in the north to Eilat in the south. No stone went unturned in the Holy Land," he further explains.

Despite its success, the long-term future of "Digging for the Truth" seems, at present, unclear. Yet one thing is certain; Josh Bernstein will remain an adventurer.

The Patriarchs would be proud.

-Suzanne Kurtz