

Interview with James Israel

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

August 4, 1996

Q: So, was the Love Family your first communal experience, or did you have ones before that?

A: No, that was really the first.

Q: Can you tell me about what brought you to the Love Family?

A: Well, I was travelling around, for a few years, just hitching around the country, hanging out. I always had it in the back of my mind that I wanted to check out communities. I ended up in Washington state, and met these people that told me about this one, and so I went. I went to the place in Seattle they had, they had a sort of inn, their connection with the public, where people would come and hang out, and get served tea, drink some stuff and just hang out. So that's where I first met people from the Family. They called themselves The Family.

Q: And what drew you to them or interested you in them?

A: Like I said, I was interested in the concept of community, so I went to check this one out. And then I liked what I saw. It seemed to be a pretty close knit group. Their whole belief system, I was kind of a little, standoffish about at first, and kind of always thought was a little stiff, which was they based the thing on the Bible, kind of loosely. Everyone who ended up joining the family would take on the last name of Israel, which I still have, since I never switched it back to my original name. But, so, and, it's like loosely based on the Bible, because, things like, pot, smoking, getting high, even doing acid and stuff, were like considered sacraments. Kind of a different interpretation than your average Christian. So it was kind of based on like the early Christians, after Jesus died, that they were going to live communally and have elders, and stuff like that. So it worked pretty well, most of the time. There was this one leader who was like the patriarch of the family.

Q: Is that Love?

A: Yeah, his name was Love. And then there were like elders that kind of headed up different households. It was really to patriarchal, that was the main drawback of it. But in a way, it was good, because it was like order. I think a lot of communities just kind of suffered from no structure. People were trying to not have any structure, and you've got to have -- I think to be successful, you've got to have some kind of structure as a community, and you've got to have a common belief. That's a couple things that this had going for it. So I like checked it out, even though I thought that, you know, it was a little stiff as far as the religious thing. But I went to the ranch just because I wanted to check it out. The ranch was up north from Seattle. This 300 acre ranch, and they farmed there, and had horses. There was a beautiful lake that everyone kind of camped around. That was their households, they lived in yurts [?]. Everyone lived in these yurts, and also little tents in households around this lake. And then there was a couple permanent structures. There was this big huge barn that we made into this kind of meeting place, where we'd have, sometimes there'd be music and dancing, and sometimes there'd be meetings. Built a big kitchen on it, had these big meals and feasts, observed certain feasts at holidays that would last several days, like Passover, and Christmas and all that stuff. It was kind of a mix of Old and New Testament. And so, what else?

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Q: How does the commune make its money? Is it from farming?

A: Well, what we did was, see, the Love Family had this big ranch that I was just describing, and it also had like about a dozen houses in town, in Seattle. So there was like a whole nother segment of the community there. They ran a store, that was a natural food store, and there was a carpentry business. People in town worked. People on the ranch worked also, but at first, they just kind of took care of the ranch and farmed. And then it became, you know, obviously that people were going to have to work on the ranch too, so they went out and did jobs around that area. Do jobs for people, carpentry kind of stuff there as well. Just whatever people could find in the area. And then other people would stay on the ranch and just do full time farming. I took care of horses, so that was my full time job. I took care of the horses, and farmed with them, and [unintelligible] with them. That was a great experience.

Q: Did the group take its meals together?

A: Some of them. Sometimes, we'd have big meals where everyone ate together. Usually, it was just the households would eat together. It varied from, maybe half a dozen households, to a dozen at different times.

Q: And a household might be like the group of people that were living in a yurt or something?

A: Well, there'd be kind of one or two yurts per household, and that would like be the central area for that household. It would have the kitchen in it, and maybe a couple of people would sleep there, but it would also be where everyone ate and hung out. And then there would be like some satellite tents around that, which served as people's bedrooms. A household would usually consist of like, this elder guy, it was a man, and his mate, and then he would have these students, or whatever that would be, younger males as well as women, some couples and some not. They would like form this household, that would be like maybe a dozen or so.

Q: Did you follow a particular kind of diet?

A: It was mostly vegetarian, but when we did eat meat, it would be like for Passover or something like that. We'd actually have this Passover celebration where we'd have these sheep, and lead them to this meadow, and everyone would get in this big huge circle, and there would be prayers said, and then the lamb would be blessed or whatever, and slaughtered. Maybe slaughter several of them, and then cook them and eat them. So it was kind of ritualized. We didn't eat much meat other than that.

Q: Did you have any daily routines or rituals that you'd do together? Like prayer or meditation or something?

A: It varied. We'd do one thing for awhile, and then do it a different way for awhile. But like, for a lot of the time, we'd like get up early and have these morning meetings, where everyone would come down about 7 o'clock or something, gather in that big barn, and have coffee and tokes and group meditation, and people would just say what was on their mind, stuff like that. That would last about an hour or so, and people would go off and do what they were going to do for the day. Some people would do things together, there would be different projects happening. Some people would go off and do something on their own. So we'd do that for a few months at a time, and then we'd stop having the group meetings, and people would just do their own thing in their household. It kind of varied. But there were always the

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-- I can't remember what they were called -- the feasts, observing certain holidays, and they would last several days, where people would come from Seattle, and be there for a few days. There was also a small group in Eastern Washington, a couple of small ones. They might come over the mountains and join.

Q: Did you have services, like Saturday or Sunday or something?

A: Um ... I remember, I'm pretty sure we took Sundays off, we didn't work. I can't remember if we did -- I think that was another thing that probably varied. For some stretches, we would get together, maybe in the morning, and do something. Other stretches, it was up to people individually to do what they wanted.

Q: Was Love, was he a teacher? Would he ever give lectures?

A: Yeah, whenever there were gatherings, he would always come and talk for awhile, kind of do the guru thing. Spout words of wisdom. He was a very charismatic character. He was really the genesis for the whole group. When they started, they started on Queen Anne Hill, in Seattle, and he had this vision to start this family. Just a few people at first were with him, and he was just out of his -- he was inspiring, he's an inspiring speaker. He would get people to stick around and help build this thing . And for awhile, that was really great, as long as he lived what he was speaking. But like what seems to happen to all guru types, they get kind of spoiled from everyone treating them like a god, and eventually it goes to their head, and it kind of did with him. He eventually started doing cocaine, and taking a lot of The Family's money to support his habit. So people, after trying individually to persuade him to change, they couldn't, and finally all the elders got together and wrote this petition, and said, "You've got to delegate some authority, and you've got to break this habit, or we're going to break the Family up." He wouldn't do it, he was real stubborn, and that's when The Family broke up. That's when I left, it was probably about ten years ago. But so it was around 300 at that time, and there was like a mass exodus. That was all the places combined. Most of them were in Seattle and the ranch. About 100 on the ranch was the average, and maybe 100 in Seattle, and the other 100 were scattered in the other places. And then there was like the mass exodus, and this guy who had joined the Family, who had joined it rich, and donated a lot of money and property, he threatened to sue to get back some property, so there was a settlement, and he got everything in town that belonged to The Family, and The Family kept the ranch. So Love moved to the ranch at that point, and about 30 faithful followers stayed with him. It's grown back up since then to probably around 100 people again.

Q: Has he cleaned up his act?

A: So I've heard, but I don't know for sure. He did, at least for a while. Whether he still has, I don't know. But I wouldn't be surprised if he did permanently, because I'm sure that shook him to his foundation there. I've always wanted to go up and visit again, I haven't been up there since I left about 10 years ago.

Q: When did you join?

A: About 16 or 17 years ago? Close to 1980, or '79.

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Q: And how long did you stay?

A: Stayed about 6 or 7 years. Lived on the ranch most of the time, lived in town for a few months, and visited the places in Eastern Washington. I lived in one of those places for about one or two months too.

Q: Do you know when -- you said The Family started on Queen Anne Hill, with Love? When was that?

A: That was -- I think The Family was about 8 years old when I joined. So that would be, early '70's.

Q: So it's a really long-lived group then.

A: It's been around almost as long as The Farm in Tennessee.

Q: Yeah. So did you leave because you became disillusioned with Love and the whole scene?

A: Yeah. Also because -- there's a certain climate there, it's very rainy, especially in Seattle, but even more so where this ranch was, it was nestled farther up against the foothills. It was mostly rainy, 80% overcast, and drizzly for 9 months of the year. And then in the summer it would clear up, and it would be beautiful, and it would lush green all the way through the summer. The summer's were incredible. But the rest of the year was pretty wet. So I kind of wanted to get away from that, for awhile anyway. Came down to California to dry out. And just to get away from the whole scene, just get back to worldly reality, and just step back and see if it's something I want to go back to. I have a strong urge to be a part of some kind of community again, but I don't think that particular one. Either be a part of starting one, or joining one. It's definitely something that I got a lot out of. It was a very wonderful way to live in many ways, particularly being able to not only have friends that you hang out with when you're not working, but to also work with them, and live with them. It's just a whole nother thing, it's a deeper kind of way to relate to people. I think we all evolved from tribal origins. I think that that's a natural way to live, and that's what that was. It was just kind of a tribal thing. It's really good, I think we should live that way. But there's all different kinds of communities. People could live in whatever made them comfortable, there's all kinds of ways of doing it. Every community I've heard of or read about or seen, is just one experiment, one way of doing it. They all succeed to various degrees. Like you said, this one has been a long-lived one, so it has succeeded in a lot of ways.

Q: I'm curious about the nuts and bolts of life there. How were economics handled? Was the community fully income-sharing?

A: Yeah, that is another thing that evolved and changed. But for most of the time I was there, and certainly since the beginning of it, it was communal sharing. Everything would go -- like on the ranch especially. In town, people lived in their own households, and tend to have their own food and take care of themselves, but I think they also, everybody put part of their income into the pot. But at the ranch, it was always, everything went. Whatever anyone earned went to the pot, and food was bought communal or grown. We grew a lot there. There would be what we called a community store, and it would just have bins of food of whatever we had, people would come and fill up, and we'd bring in produce. We tended to eat things in season. In the spring, there would be a lot of food. And yeah, so, that was all very communal.

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Q: Was there any sort of a work sharing system?

A: Well, sure, I think that was mostly in the households. Everyone would help clean the dishes, keep things clean. But the people that did go out to work, or that had certain jobs around the farm, they'd be freed up to do that, maybe not have to do so much around the house, as people that didn't. But that tended to go along sexual lines. It was contributed to by the patriarchal-ness of it, so the guys tended to go out working, the women tended to stay home. That wasn't strictly the way it was. There was some women that would go out and work. A lot of women had babies and felt like -- they wanted to stay home and take care of them. It was a really good place for children to grow up in. They had a really well-rounded childhood, because they not only had parental influence, which was of course the strongest, but they did have this influence from all the other adults and children. I think it was really good for them.

Q: Was there a school?

A: Yeah. There was a home school. That was, the community people would -- all the kids would come together to this communal school thing.

Q: And then members would take turns being teachers?

A: Well, there were certain people that liked to teach, and that was their thing. There would probably be -- different people would help care take the kids at different times. Like when we had these events, a lot of times there'd be an effort to get all the kids together in one place, and a couple of people would watch them while everyone else could participate in the ceremony.

Q: Since I haven't been there, I don't know what the ranch looks like. Is it very remote, or are there lots of neighbors nearby?

A: It feel remote when you're there, but it's not all that remote. It's about an hour north of Seattle. It's at the end of a road, so that kind of helps the remoteness feeling. But there's farms and stuff all around. It's in an area where the patches of land are from five to ten acres, up to 50 or 100 acres, they're all different sizes around there. And besides being at the end of the road, our land bordered on national forest. So from there back, it was all just empty land. So that kind of added to it too. So you could go hiking up there. There were some beautiful places on the land to go to.

Q: Were there places to swim and stuff?

A: Oh yeah, well we lived around this lake out there. That was a beautiful lake. There was this hill you could climb nearby and go up and look down on it. It was shaped like this huge butterfly. We called it Butterfly Lake. And very nice for swimming. It had reeds around it, natural state. It had this little island in the middle. It would freeze over some winters, and we'd have these skating parties, and a big bonfire on the island. Lot of fun when we did that.

Q: I know you lived in yurts and tents and things, but what was the situation like in terms of thing like electricity, and gas for cooking?

A: There was electricity at the barn. And there was a house by the barn too, that originally there with the land. That burned down a couple years after I joined the family, and was never replaced. But there

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was electricity there at the community center. And in all the households around the lake, people would use kerosene or batteries for light. Or they use candles, wood heat.

Q: How did you get your water?

A: We had a well, and pumped it up to a cistern, and that fed the whole place. There was plenty of water there, being in Western Washington. We had this sauna set up right by the lake too, it was kind of in a central location. It was big enough to get like, you could fit like probably 20 people in there at once. That was real nice, especially in the winter. We'd go there a lot, and dive in the lake to cool off. It was great. Even when the lake was froze over, we'd cut a whole in it, and people would dip down in the ice water.

Q: What would you do for showers and washing clothes?

A: Everybody had their own shower [unintelligible] at all the households. We had plumbing, so it was just sitting out there.

Q: You had plumbing?

A: Yeah, there was water through the pipes to each household, plumbed into the sinks, and people would heat their own water either with wood built up under a water heater, or else they'd have propane. That's how we cooked, I guess, with propane.

Q: And then did you have outhouses?

A: Yeah.

Q: Would you just take your laundry to town now and then?

A: No, people would wash it there. There was a washing machine, a couple of them. Let me think . . . actually, I don't think people used a washing machine. There were showers at the communal area too, but most people had their own showers too. For a long time, -- did we ever get a washing machine? I don't know. But I think for most of the time, if not all the time, people, how they did their laundry was they would have these buckets, just those white 5 gallon buckets, and a plunger. And you put your clothes in there an a little soap, and you plunge it. It was very effective, and only took a couple minutes for reach article of clothing. And then you rinse it out, and hang it up. People would each take care of their own laundry.

Q: What were your relationships like with the neighbors?

A: It was all like one big happy family, basically. Of course, there was, like all relationships, there were ups and downs. There was constantly a think of learning how to all get along in this setting where it's kind of intense because there's people around all the time. You could go off and be by yourself if you wanted too. But it was very intense being around a lot of people. But, we all did pretty good at getting along.

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Q: How were decisions made in the community? Did Love make a lot of the decisions?

A: He was like the last word. In each household, the elder had the last word. But it was pretty democratic, even so. The elders would listen to the people who lived with them, and Love would listen to everyone. But they did have the -- we tried to arrive at things everyone could agree on, but if it came down to it, they had to put their foot down and say, "This is how it's going to be." And they did. So they were like the last word.

Q: Did the community own things like cars and stuff, so when you would go out to work, you'd use the community car?

A: Yeah.

Q: Were there rules that governed people's conduct?

A: Yeah. But as far as rules, we really tried to keep it really simple, not have a lot of rules. It was mostly very general, like "love is the answer," or, "it comes to just trying to work stuff out." There were manners that people were expected to live by, and expected to do your part and contribute. But it was pretty loose. If people had a problem with someone, they'd -- like, there was like, people were generally encouraged, if they had a problem with someone, to try to get a third person to sit in and kind of mediate and work it out. So that if two people had a problem they could move on.

Q: Were there any rules about things like drugs or alcohol or sex?

A: There wasn't much alcohol just because money wasn't spent on it. I think there were times when people tried to make wine batches and beer, but no one was every very successful at that. The place in Eastern Washington grew a bunch of grapes, and I think they made some wine, shared it with The Family on holiday occasions and stuff. But alcohol was never really a problem just because it wasn't around. Sex was -- there were some, kind of, it was kind of open relationships, but for the most part, people stayed in couples, but it was accepted that if people wanted to they could do something more than that. There was a couple kind of triads, things going on. But mostly it was couples. It was -- the thing about living in community like that, it's like, you really don't need a lot of rules, because everyone can see what's going on. It's all open, it's like, you can't really sneak stuff, you can't really have a clandestine affair with someone, because it's going to be found out. So we kept things pretty open, people were pretty open about everything.

Q: What was the best part of living communally, for you?

A: The best part was just the togetherness of it. There's no loneliness, because -- out in the real world here, if you don't live with a partner, you have friends that you see once in awhile, but you're alone a lot. People get lonely, and it's just very separate. Everybody's in their own little cubicles. But if you're living communally, there's always someone to talk to if you want to talk, there's always someone to hang out with if you want to. You can be alone if you want, but there's not that longing for company, because it's all around you. I think it helped with people's romantic relationships too, because there was always people to talk to and bounce stuff off of, and it wasn't just two people kind of locked together in their house, and not having other friends to turn to very much. And so, I think it's a really good way for humans to relate, because we are very social animals. And even people that like to be alone a lot can do

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that if they want to. They've got their own space in their tent, or they've got, they can walk in the woods, there's plenty of ways to be alone too. It's not like you're forced to be among people all the time.

Q: What about the flip side? What were the worst parts?

A: Well the worst parts of this particular arrangement was the patriarchy, and kind of the authoritarianism, sometimes. It wasn't that bad, but just because of the way it was structured, it was bound to be some of that. What else? Kind of lack of contact with the outside of world, we were kind of in our own little world there and didn't go out much. We went out some. Groups would go out, or people that worked would go out. And we'd invite people in, too. But still, it was kind of isolated. Which was good and bad. In a way it's nice to just leave the world behind, for awhile at least, and experience something different. What else? I guess those were really the only drawbacks.

Q: Do you feel from your experiences that you're drawn any conclusions or come up with lessons about what makes communal living work or not work?

A: Yeah. Like I said, I think people have to have a unifying belief. It helps a lot if people work together on projects. I think, to me, the ideal community would not be where people would have to go out and work, but they would have cottage industries, things that they could do together on the land, crafts, or produce publications, just something that would sell to the outside world. Or you could even have high tech things going on. Graphic work, for outside people, and yet do it there, on the farm. So just any kind of work that would bring people together to work on these things together. Because, to me, the whole idea of community is to really learn how to live with people. Not even that so much as actually do it, rather than learn it, actually be there doing it, relating on a day to day basis, in harmony with people. To me, that's what it's all about. That's what makes it worth it. So that's one thing. And then, the other, I would say the other big thing that I learned is that the structure can't be patriarchal or matriarchal, it's got to be not based on sex. And yet, you've got to have a structure. So it's kind of a tricky balance. I don't know how I would do it. There's a good thing about having one person that the decisions finally ended up at, because he could say, "Alright, I've heard all this input. Everyone pretty much seems to agree on this thing, let's do this." And then things would move, things would get done. Whereas if you're trying to be too democratic about it, especially if it's go to be consensual, then things don't get done. People are constantly debating what should be done, but things don't actually get done. So I don't know if the best way would be to have a rotating spot at the head there, or what. But I think it is good to have some process where decisions actually get made, someone's responsible at the end there to make the decision, whether it's the group that votes and majority wins, or -- even though I don't think it would be good to have 100 people in the community always voting on every decision. So I think it would come down to some sort of democratic way of doing it. But like I say, I think it keeps coming back to, the only way to really have a successful community is people really do have to have a core belief, they have to agree on something. That's got to be the unifying force, so that when things do come up, and people disagree, they can come back to that.

Q: Would you say the Love Family had that core belief system?

A: Yeah.

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Q: Was that in the Bible?

A: Yeah, that was basically based on the Bible. But it was not Christian in the way people are these days where they beat you over the head with their belief. It was more like, okay, take the most basic things in the Bible that are there that Jesus said and were also in the Old Testament, which were things like, "God is love," "The time is now," and "Giving is more blessed than receiving," all those kinds of things that are about -- just the basic truths. I guess that's it.

Q: As a final question, would you regard the Love Family as a success or a failure?

A: I would say it was a success. More successful in some ways than others, but overall, a success, sure. I think one of the best things about it, actually, was that it would evolve. We would try different things at different times, it wasn't real rigid. And that allowed it to change and evolve so that things could be done differently, and maybe find better ways of doing things. I think that's another important aspect of being in community, is that you've got to be able to do that. But yeah, I'd say overall it was a success.

Q: Even though it went through that break-up period?

A: Yeah. And that was mainly just because of one man's weakness. He happened to be the leader, so therefore it caused a major break-up. At one point, we were trying to see if we could break off, because Love lived mostly in town, and the ranch would operate pretty smoothly on its own. More democratically than it did when Love was around. We could've broken off and been our own community and done fine. At one point during that crisis situation, that was discussed. But he had [unintelligible] ... and everything, it was all in his name. So we couldn't really do that.

Q: Well, thanks very much.