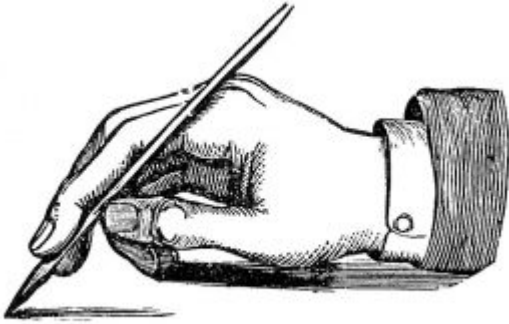


# The Great American Term Paper

written by Guest Contributor | June 5, 2017



## 1

We've been waiting for more than two centuries for someone to write The Great American Novel. There have been countless very, very *good* novels, but none that was truly great.

But The Great American Term Paper? That's an entirely different story.

That story began in Brooklyn almost forty years ago. Known mainly for its rundown Hebrew school, the Avenue R Temple was a veritable bar mitzvah mill. Eleven- and twelve-year-old boys would attend a couple of two-hour classes every week to learn just enough Hebrew to read a few lines of Torah at their bar mitzvahs. And though Rabbi Steinbach extended an open invitation to Shabbos services to every bar mitzvah boy, almost none of us ever took him up on his offer.

Many of the temples around the city held singles dances to raise money. They were advertised primarily in *The New York Post*, aka "*The Jewish Daily Post*," largely because nearly all their columnists and readers happened to be Jewish.

These dances were usually held on Saturday night after Shabbos had ended, but the Avenue R Temple had theirs on Sunday afternoon. The teenagers and young adults who attended were primarily from our neighborhood.

I had much better things to do than go to these dances. Just a couple of blocks from the temple was Kelly Park, where you could spend the entire day playing basketball, handball, stickball, softball, and even tennis (if you shelled out fifteen bucks for a permit).

My friend, Ira, was planning to go to the dance that coming Sunday, and invited me to come along. I agreed to go only if it was raining.

"Dan, don't you want to meet a nice Jewish girl?"

"Maybe I can meet one at Kelly Park."

"Sure. But your chances are a lot better at the dance."

"OK, I'll see you if it rains."

## 2

The sun woke me up that morning, and I got to the park just when it opened. I had such a good time, I even skipped lunch. Around five o'clock, I stopped by the Avenue R Temple. There, in the lobby of the Hebrew School, I saw Ira seated behind a table, chatting with a couple of girls.

I felt a little self-conscious in my torn jeans and sweaty tee shirt. Ira called me over and introduced me. While the four of us were chatting, I could hear the music in the gym downstairs. As they were leaving, Ira began to smile.

"Dan, are you wondering why I'm sitting out here, instead of going downstairs?"

"You're a mind-reader!"

"Indeed I am."

Just then, three more girls came up the stairs and into the lobby.

"Girls, would you like to sign our mailing list?"

They came over to the table and signed Ira's list. After they left, Ira burst out laughing. "This is like shooting fish in a barrel."

"Are you working for the Temple?"

"No Dan, I'm working for *me*."

"What are you going to do with the list?"

"Well, I have two alternatives. I can use their names for my mailing list when I run my *own* dance."

"Or?"

"Well, you see those check marks?"

"Holy *shit*!"

"Yeah, Dan, those are the ones I'll call up for dates."

"So the Temple doesn't know what you're doing?"

"Well, Mr. Brownstein sort of does. I told him I was watching the lobby."

"He believed you?"

“Don’t I look like an honest guy?”

### 3

When we entered Brooklyn College that fall, the school offered just a few computer courses. Ira took them and then continued studying on his own.

“I’m telling you, Dan, computers will eventually take over the world.”

“Yeah, but in the meantime, maybe you should think about how you’re going to make a living.”

It would be another twenty years before Ira would be proven right. The advent of PCs was the first step. Still, in mid 1980s, PCs cost over three thousand dollars (or about double that in today’s dollars), and all they were really good for was word processing.

But by the new millennium, most Americans were on the Internet, and everything had changed. Ira, who ran a small computer repair business, was ready to make his big move.

“Dan, how would you like to go into business with me? With your brains and my creativity, we could go far.”

I was an English Professor at Brooklyn College, newly-divorced, and struggling with child support payments. The City University paid fairly well, but I knew that even teaching every summer, I would never earn nearly enough.

When Ira outlined his business plan, my first question was: Is that *legal*?

“Wrong question, Dan.” He paused for effect. “The right question?” Again, the meaningful pause. “Can we get away with it?”

In a nutshell, the plan was to run a nationwide contest for college students, that we would call The Great American Term Paper Contest. All college students were eligible. They could e-mail us their best term papers, and would be eligible for a range of monetary awards. First prize would be \$10,000, and the title, author of that year’s Great American Term Paper. There would be second, third, fourth prize, and fifth prizes, with lesser financial rewards.

But perhaps a more important set of rewards, – there would be one hundred honorable mentions. Each recipient would receive a frameable certificate – something nice to list on applications to grad school, law school, business school – or even medical school.

Students could enter the contest as many times as they wished, sending a one-dollar entry fee for each paper through PayPal, an online startup. Very anxious to introduce its services to all those college students, the company would provide its services to us for free.

Who would judge the term papers? I had access to an army of interns, who would receive college credit for their labor. They would do all the initial screening, eliminating over ninety-five percent of the submissions. The final decisions would be made by a panel of English professors, who would be paid small honorariums – a euphemism for chump change – but a very useful listing on their CVs.

“So, Ira, I’m guessing that if enough students send in their papers, we can finance the prize money with their entry fees.”

“You see, Dan, you’re just as smart as I always thought you were.”

Then, reading my mind, he added, “But you have another question, possibly one about how we’re going to get the word out to millions of college students.”

“Won’t that cost a tremendous amount of money?”

“It would indeed, if we had to pay for it.”

“So, what’s your plan, *Kemosabe*?” (If you’re as old as we are, you’d remember that that’s what Tonto used to call the Lone Ranger. It probably means “old friend.”)

“My plan, Tonto, is to send a press release to 5,000 college newspaper editors. Our contest will be big news to them – and to their millions of readers. If we can create a huge buzz, then a lot of students will enter the contest.”

#### 4

Over the next few weeks, we fleshed out our plan. There would be follow-up letters to the college newspapers from “students” who had entered the contest. We would send press releases to scores of daily newspapers, as well as smaller papers in college towns. Student interns would be lined up, and our panel of distinguished professors assembled.

As Ira observed, once a bandwagon starts rolling, everybody and his brother wants to jump on. And pretty soon, *our* bandwagon started to roll.

Still, I had my doubts. Ira’s plan was working, but I didn’t see how we would be making very much money unless we received hundreds of thousands of dollars from entry fees. But Ira said the real money would be made once the contest *really* took off, probably after the first year.

Our press release and letters were printed in hundreds of college papers, and we managed to assemble a panel of respectable, if not quite distinguished English professors. PayPal was delighted to see the trickle of payments from college students become a flow, and then a torrent. Within weeks it was clear that we would more than break even.

We began getting lots of free publicity, not just from college newspapers,

but from local newspapers, radio, and TV. Whenever possible, we directed them to our panel of contest judges. In just a few months, Ira's plan had become a reality. And very soon, we would learn who had written The Great American Term Paper.

## 5

The announcement of the name of the contest winner was a major media event. Each of the four national TV networks sent a camera crew to the campus of the tiny Midwest liberal arts college that she attended. Offers flooded in for full scholarships from dozens of journalism schools, as well as job offers from major newspapers and magazines to each of the five prize winners and to many of the students who had received honorable mention.

In the meantime, I had quite unexpectedly been promoted to full professor, and was becoming something of a celebrity in academic circles. Best of all, I would no longer need to teach summer classes.

But something had been bothering me. I needed to have a serious talk with Ira. He had alluded to a long-term plan he had to make a lot more money. The Great American Term Paper Contest would be just a stepping stone.

So, one evening we met at our favorite hangout, *The Majestic Diner* on Kings Highway, two blocks off Ocean Parkway. Ira was ready to lay out his master plan.

"First of all, you understand that e-mail lists can be very valuable – especially lists of college students."

I nodded. *That* I could live with.

But Ira had a still better idea.

Rather than sell the lists, we could rent them out – over and over again. We could limit each customer to just a single use of the list, so he can't steal it from us.

I smiled. My old friend thought of *everything*.

"Moving right along," he said, "let's get to the tricky part."

I gave him a sharp look.

"Yes, Dan. This is the part that you may not like. In fact, I would be surprised if you did."

Now he *really* had my attention.

"Ira, we've been friends for a long time. I know you like to take chances sometimes. Big risks, really. So, tell me right up front, is this thing you have in mind..."

“Legal?”

“Yeah, *is* it legal?”

“To be absolutely truthful, I don’t know. It’s kind of in a gray area.”

“OK, then let me rephrase: Is it *moral*?”

“That depends on who’s answering. To *me*, it’s just business.”

“And to *me*?”

“Well, we all have to decide for ourselves. But I strongly suspect that you would find this *quite* immoral.”

“Ira, I love you like a brother. But I think for both our sakes, we better end this discussion right now.”

“Fine. So, here’s the deal: I will not involve you in any way with what I’m going to do. It will be completely separate from The Great American Term Paper Contest. In fact, what we can do in the next few days is talk to a lawyer. Or maybe have *your* lawyer and *my* lawyer talk to each other.”

“Ira, I appreciate your honesty – *and* about your looking out for my best interests. But I’m still worried about *you*. Are you sure you know what you’re getting yourself into?”

“Right now, let’s just worry about *you*. Like you said, I’m a risk-taker. And you’ll agree, it’s hard to win big unless you take big risks.

## 6

Two weeks later, Ira and I signed the papers. He bought out my half of the business. He would continue to run the contest, and I would go back to being a full time academic. In fact, the word on the street was that the City University would soon make me a distinguished professor. You might say that, without having written a word, *I* was the biggest winner of The Great American Term Paper contest.

I had no idea what Ira was up to, and I really didn’t *want* to know. Soon we began to drift apart, and I wondered if perhaps he was distancing himself to protect me.

When my daughter graduated from high school, he wrote her a huge check. It worried me, but I just thanked him for his generosity. A year later, when Ira came to my son’s bar mitzvah, I kidded him about how much Larry had earned for each word of his Torah portion.

When we did talk, neither of us ever mentioned Ira’s business activities. He had joined a few charity boards, and was often mentioned in the newspapers – even on page six of “The Jewish Daily Post.” I just hoped he would be alright

– *whatever* it was that he was doing.

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A month later, completely out of the blue, he called to give me some utterly unexpected news. “Dan, you’re not going to believe this! I’m making *Aliyah!*”

“*What?* You’re moving to *Israel?* Permanently? Are you *nuts?*”

“I suppose I am. Anyway, I’m at Kennedy right now. My flight leaves in an hour.”

“Will I ever see you again?”

“Of *course!* Look, I gotta go now. I’ll call you in a couple of days.”

When he hung up, I was left trying to digest what he had said. Was he in trouble? Was the FBI or the NYPD breathing down his neck? Did this have to do with his business?

Two days later, it was all over the news, along with his photo. The Great American Term Paper Contest had been just a front for Ira’s *real* business. And the currency used by *that* business was the hundreds of thousands of term papers that had been submitted to the contest each year.

These papers had been sold at the bargain rate of a dollar a page to term paper mills, which then resold them for ten, or even twenty dollars a page to lazy students. In his defense, it could be said that not *one* of the papers he sold was a prize-winner, or even an honorable mention. Right, I thought: A thief with honor.

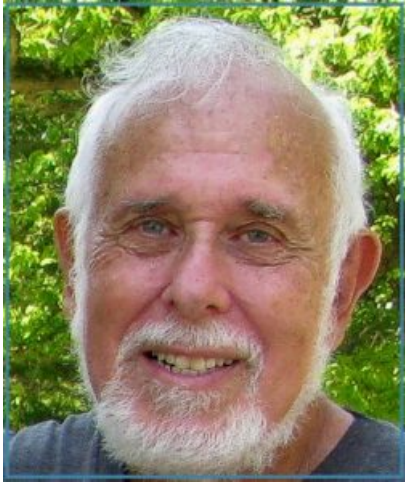
It took a while for all of this to sink in. Ira was safe in Israel, and he had done everything possible to protect me. That included providing what lawyers call “plausible deniability.” I truly had no idea what he had been up to. Still, that was because I didn’t *want* to know. When the Chancellor of the City University asked if I had known what Ira would do, I told her about our conversation at the Mirage Diner. So yes, I had some premonition that he might be up to no good; but no, I did not have a clue as to *what* he might actually do. She said that it certainly appeared that Ira had wanted to protect me, and that he had succeeded

Was this the end of The Great American Term Paper Contest? If anything, the scandal seemed to have had the opposite effect. A new group contest judges – all truly distinguished professors representing the nation’s most prestigious colleges and universities – provided at least a patina of impeccable rectitude.

The contest was bigger than ever, with students from nearly every college competing. The prize money was quintupled, and there were now one thousand honorable mentions. Offers of scholarships and jobs multiplied. And perhaps most importantly, a valuable lesson had been learned. Like our huge banks,

The Great American Term Paper Contest was too big to fail.

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A recovering economics professor, **Steve Slavin** earns a living writing math and economics books. His short story collection, "To the City, with Love," was recently published.