

ללמוד וללמד

Vol. XI, No. 1



Writers in Our Midst

Interviews with recently published authors Yuval Taylor
Amelie Suskind-Liu, and Kenneth Moss

An excerpt from Joseph Peterson's new book

Benjamin Usha's remembrance of his grandfather

Rabbi Larry Edwards' explication of a last
Yehuda Amichai poem

The return of our own Rebel, Jeff Ruby

... and more

Volume XI Number 1

Contents

Introduction	5
Writers in Our Midst Interviews with Yuval Taylor, Amelie Suskind-Liu, and Kenneth Moss	7
Cumulonimbus Calvus by Joseph Peterson	20
Yehuda Amichai's Last Poems: פתוח סגור פתוח - Open Closed Open presented by Rabbi Larry Edwards	24
In Spite of a Pandemic photos of the Rodfei Zedek Community	28
Under Your Wing: In Memory of Anatoliy Usha by Benjamin Usha	30
Words of Torah by Marty Schwartz, Cecilia Ly Rose Landes, Lily Devir, Orlie Weitzman	35
"Jewish Writers" by Rebel Without a Clue/Jeff Ruby	42



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Introduction to Volume XI Number 1

We "People of the Book" may not always realize the wealth of writing that flows from our own Congregation. Past issues of *To Learn and To Teach* have proudly presented a wide range of writers and writing, and in this issue we spotlight some recent publications and their authors.

Our writers include teen-age Amelie Suskind-Liu, reflective about the uses of writing for herself and others. We meet new member Kenneth Moss and his challenging work on modern Jewish history and culture. Yuval Taylor exemplifies the breadth of our writers' interests.

We continue our exploration of Yehuda Amichai's poetry with the help of Rabbi Larry Edwards. Joe Peterson gives us another taste of his own poetic vision. Ben Usha shares another installment in his family's journey to Rodfei Zedek.

As always, bar and bat mitzvah talks impress us with the insights of our youngest writers. This year there was a remarkable number. We include a small sample: Marty Schwartz, Cecilia Ly Rose Landes, and Lily Devir. And we're grateful to our resident writing Rebel Jeff Ruby for another dose of perspective and humor.

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Writers in Our Midst

The editors interviewed some members of *Rodfei Zedek*, who have recently published: Yuval Taylor's *Zora and Langston: A Story of Friendship and Betrayal* came out in 2019 (W.W. Norton & Company). In 2021 Harvard University Press brought out Kenneth Moss's *An Unchosen People*; Jewish Political Reckoning in Interwar Poland. Amelie Suskind-Liu worked with her grandmother, Leslie Lewinter-Suskind, to create *Matzo Ball-Wonton Thanksgiving* (2021).

Yuval Taylor



Could you begin by describing your writing and how you came to it?

I'd been working in publishing since 1988, and I was acquiring books that fit into my publisher's line and interested me to boot; I'd also been republishing books that were out of print or hard to find. It occurred to me in 1998 that most of the slave narratives – books written by ex-slaves (mostly prior to the Civil War) – were out of print, and that they should be reissued. So in 1999 I published, in two volumes, *I Was Born a Slave*, a compilation of twenty slave narratives; I edited them, annotated them, and wrote introductions to each one. That was my first book, though technically I wasn't the author, just the editor. But the writing of the introductions and annotations really excited me. That led to a few more things along the same lines, including a young-adult book called *Growing Up in Slavery*.

In 2005 or thereabouts, a British writer, Hugh Barker, approached me with

an idea for a book. I liked it so much that I asked him if he'd be interested in a collaboration with me: we'd write the book together, splitting chapters between us. The result was my first coauthored book, *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music* (2005). A few years later I proposed to a close friend, Jake Austen, that we collaborate on a book, and the result was *Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip-Hop*. I'd long been a huge fan of African American culture and music, and these two books were a natural outgrowth of that.

After I'd finished *Darkest America*, a magazine approached Jake and me and asked us if there were any stories we didn't write about but were related to the subject, stories that we hadn't yet told. Immediately, the story of Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes occurred to me, and though the magazine never followed up with the idea, I decided to make that my next book. As an editor of nonfiction books, I saw the potential for them to be as rich and meaningful as a great novel can be, and that's what my aim was in writing *Zora and Langston: A Story of Friendship and Betrayal*, which was published in 2019.

Do you see your work as part of a trend, as related to contemporary musical and literary movements or contemporary political or social realities? Do you have wider goals or motives in your writing beyond your own interests?

No, I've never viewed my books as related to any trends. They're rather old-fashioned books in a way. When I read current biographies, they don't seem terribly different from biographies that were written fifty years ago, and biographies are the models for what I write. Of course, there's a huge difference in approaches between, say, Jonathan Eig and Robert Caro (both excellent biographers), but I can't chalk that up to any trend or movement.

I think every writer has some wider goals or motives besides expounding on his or her own interests. In each of my books I was trying to make some points and to provoke thoughts about certain issues. *Faking It* questioned the idea of authenticity and found that taking that idea too seriously--or approaching it in the wrong way--had some very unfortunate results, ranging from historical falsification to racism to self-destruction. *Darkest America* tried to complicate the idea of blackface. And *Langston and Zora* wrestled with issues like victimhood, collaboration, patronage, racial pride, and African American conservatism.

On the other hand, the book I'm currently writing – which tries to retell the story of Stevie Nicks and Lindsey Buckingham in the 1970s – doesn't really have any "wider goals" – at least, not yet.

It's meant to just tell a dramatic story of the lives and loves of two musical geniuses as richly as possible.

Following up on your mention of authenticity, could you discuss recent controversies over Porgy and Bess, black characters and Jewish artists?

DuBose Heyward, who was not Jewish, wrote his novel *Porgy* in 1925. During the 1920s a large number of white writers wrote books about the black communities they

were familiar with, and these were sympathetic works. Their aim was to capture the innate poetry of the lived black experience. Perhaps they were presumptuous and condescending – I'm not going to judge them all. Heyward and his wife Dorothy (who also was not Jewish) staged *Porgy* on Broadway in 1927, and it was a huge success. During that period, Broadway staged dozens of plays about – and acted by – African Americans, including some that were written and produced by African Americans. And African Americans gave the production largely positive reviews. *Porgy* was then restaged as an opera,

Books by Yuval

Zora and Langston: A Story of Friendship and Betrayal (2019)

Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music (2007)

Growing Up in Slavery: Stories of Young Slaves as Told by Themselves (2005)

Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip-Hop (2012)

The Cartoon Music Book (2002)

Porgy and Bess, with music by (the Jewish) George Gershwin and lyrics cowritten by his brother Ira, in 1935. *Porgy*, in all its versions, is typical of white-authored works about African Americans in the early part of the twentieth century, including most of the Broadway plays, in that it doesn't bring up politics and doesn't showcase the mistreatment of blacks at the hands of whites. It is set in an all-black world which is largely imaginary. Nobody now thinks that it's "authentic," but that idea was once one of its draws.

So what do we conclude about Jewish artists inclined to choose a black subject? If they can't be authentic, should they just refrain?

I guess it depends on what you mean by "authentic." Many Jewish authors – Ira Berlin, Jonathan Eig, some of my best friends (Ben Austen and Ethan Michaeli), myself, and countless others – have tackled African American subject matters. As long as we are faithful to the facts, we have every right to do so, and can certainly provide illumination and focus. We have all found ourselves recipients of gratefulness from African American readers. I don't think we're being presumptuous or condescending.

On the other hand, a white writer (Jewish or not) who tackles African American subject matter in order to showcase the kindness of white folks or ignores essential facts about the African American experience or creates a

fictional world may end up being viewed as presumptuous, condescending, or worse. Should whites not write fiction about blacks? That's a very tough row to hoe.

Thinking about Gershwin and many others, do you have something to say about "cultural appropriation" in the use of black idioms?

Oh, yes, I do! I'll quote Ann Douglas, from her book *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*

Blacks imitating and fooling whites, whites imitating and stealing from blacks, blacks reappropriating and transforming what has been stolen, whites making yet another foray on black styles, and on and on: this is American popular culture.

Yuval Taylor has been a Hyde Parker and member of Rodfei Zedek for some twenty years, with occasional years at KAMII. He earned an undergraduate degree in Politics from Princeton and a master's degree in American Studies from Iowa. He's married to retired professor of literature, Karen Duys. Daughter Thalia studies law at the University of California, Davis and son Jacob is a junior at Rutgers. He worked as an editor with A Cappella Books and Lawrence Hill Books, where he initiated the "Library of Black America" series. Now he's a product manager for a small financial technology firm, Portfolio123.

Amelie Suskind-Liu



How did you get started as a writer?

I think it really all started in fifth grade. I wrote stories and journals beforehand,

because my bubbe would always tell me, "Write it down, because in fifty years you'll want to look back and read it."

In fifth grade I was assigned an essay to write about your name and the origins of your name. I talked about my three names in that essay. Amelie and then אִמֶּלִי and then Liu Ting Wei (刘婷伟), my English name, my Hebrew name, and my Chinese name. Given it was fifth grade, the writing wasn't as beautiful as I would have liked it to be; but it was the first time I thought about my identity as someone who is not just American, but Jewish and Chinese, and how that manifested in my name.

From then on I started to write all about my identity. Every school assignment I've had, which is kind of crazy, even in analytical papers, I find a way to bring in my Chinese and Jewish identity and especially my identity regarding religion and culture. Also, after losing my father, I wrote a lot about that.

Describe your process of writing with your grandmother.

Writing with my bubbe is just the best thing in the entire world. She's

actually the first person I read my writing to, whether it be creative writing or an English assignment, a history assignment, anything. I always call her up. I say, "Can I read something to you, this piece that I wrote?" And she says, "Of course, of course." She always gives me feedback and tells me how lovely it was. She's the person I trust with my writing, in all aspects.

Before the pandemic, she had come to stay with us with my grandpa, for a few weeks. Then the quarantine hit, and they ended up being isolated with us for four months. That was very much a blessing. With Zoom school I had a lot of time. I'd go downstairs to their guest room in the basement. For hours I'd just talk to her about everything, about issues in my life, when I'm annoyed at my siblings, But particularly I'd talk to her about my identity. Over quarantine, with the #StopAsianHate movement, I've thought a lot about my identity as someone who feels super-Jewish on the inside but looks pretty Chinese on the outside. She told me a little about her experience being a Jew in the 1940s and 50s, with blond hair and blue eyes, how she felt kind of different, as well. She felt the difference between how she felt on the inside and how she looked on the outside; and that was similar to my experience.

Eventually, after talking to her, I really did realize the beauty of my identity as someone who is Chinese *and* Jewish, that intersection. We settled on creating a children's book, because I wanted children younger than I to realize that

they should feel proud and see the beauty in their cultures. I'd talk to her about what I was writing, she would talk to me about what she was thinking, and we would just type. We settled on the story of Thanksgiving, because it's both of ours favorite holiday, a quintessentially American holiday. We'd just sit next to each other for hours typing on the computer, talking, and then taking breaks to talk about other things. It was very much a back-and-forth process, a lot of talking involved.

**Amelie's Book
with coauthor
Leslie Lewinter-Suskind
Matzo Ball-Wonton Thanksgiving
(2021)**

What age is the book appropriate for?

Well, I've actually read it to high-schoolers – which is kind of funny – because they wanted to hear it. But I think anywhere from four or five to eight or nine. (The high schoolers did enjoy it, too!)

What is your motivation in writing? Simply that you like to write? Or are you trying to impart a lesson?

I haven't thought about that before. I think it's a lot of both. I absolutely love to write, because, as many other teenagers feel, and every person in the whole world, I just have so many ideas in my head. I love to write because I feel very confused and conflicted sometimes in my identity, and writing is an outlet that helps me sort it out. It gets it in paper form in front of me and allows me to read my thoughts and dissect them, not to the point that it's counterproductive, but to the point where

I understand what I'm feeling. So I love to write, and I love creative writing.

But also I think a lot of my writing has to do with getting a message out there. I've previously written a few op eds. One last year was published in *The Tribune* about my experience as a multi-cultural teen. A lot of my writing is about loving your identity and bringing light and being inclusive to all aspects of what a Jew might look like or what a Chinese person might look like and feel like.

When my dad passed away a lot of my writing was about resilience and telling the story of a young girl. It's always a young girl and her father in all my writing. I use writing as an outlet for me to get my feelings out, but I also use it to share my experience in hopes that other teens, kids, adults feel a similar way. They feel hurt in a way and they feel they're not alone. In both experiences – losing a parent and being a Jew of color – it's an isolating experience. And even as an adolescent – everything feels that you're alone even when you're not. It's in the hopes of letting others know there are people going through similar things.

Are you thinking of continuing your writing, perhaps as a profession?

I think that when I'm older writing is going to find its way somehow into my career. I have no idea, honestly, what type of career I want – but in any career there's going to be a similar idea of what I do with my writing, trying to inspire of

some sort of social change around being inclusive and making people feel that their experiences are shared by others, whether that be through grief work or through promoting this idea of multiculturalism and shedding light on that. I do know for a fact that I will continue to write and hopefully publish things, get things out in the world.

Describe the reactions you've had to your writing? Do you feel comfortable in school, for instance, being known as a writer?

The reactions I've had are more than I could have ever imagined. First, with my family, I knew they were going to be supportive because they're amazing. I love them. But I reconnected with one of my dad's cousins and learned a lot about my Chinese culture and my Chinese history and ancestry from that. I've had so much support from my family in terms of them reaching out to me and telling me not only that they loved the book but how much they are inspired by me, which makes me feel so good. With my siblings it sparked a lot of conversation in terms of what is it like to be someone who's both Chinese and Jewish. Creating that dialogue in my family, having those discussions has been amazing.

In terms of the Jewish community, which I feel the closest to, the support has been overwhelming, the best experience. I have had so many temples reach out and tell me they'd love to have me speak to teens and tell them about

my experience. Particularly an organization called Edot Midwest, a community of Jewish people of color in the Midwest – I've talked to them. It's amazing to get connected with these communities not only of Jews, but Jews of color.

Rodfei Zedek obviously has a special place in my heart, so getting to talk to the magazine and the Rabbi, it's just been amazing. To hear about people's thoughts on the book and to get the support from synagogues that tell me that there are so many ways that you can be a Jew, and there are people who you

wouldn't expect to be Jews but are Jews, and there are so many different faces of Judaism. Being told that and shown that has been amazing.

Links to Projects Amelie supports

<https://childrengrieve.org/donate>

<https://edot.wedid.it/>

The most interesting thing is I've learned so much from reading to children. When I ask for questions at the end, I get a couple like "What's it like being 16 and being able to drive?" I don't have my driver's license so I can't answer that question, but they actually don't ask many questions. They tell me about their experience. People are so eager to share their experience after listening to the book, which makes me so happy.

In school, I really feel happy that I'm known as a writer and someone who talks and does a lot of work regarding my identity in the school. I've had so many teachers reach out. One told me last year that he has biracial children, and reading my op ed gave him a new perspective on how to parent and how to approach

conversations with them. Students reach out and say, "Hey, I have such a similar experience." Not only the support, but the people who have gotten something from the book or the op eds I've written and told me about it has been amazing. All in all it's been the best experience of my life, for sure.

You haven't had any trouble with fame?

I haven't had trouble with fame. Talking with people has been the coolest part. Maybe my next career when I'm older will be like a famous movie star and that's when I'll have to deal with fame, but right now....

Do see anything in your Jewish tradition as prompting your writing?

For sure. When I think about all the work I do, writing and sharing experiences about my multiculturalism and even – I facilitate grief groups – my work in the grief community, tikkun olam has been a guiding force for me throughout my whole experience of doing the things I love. Often, and especially during the pandemic, it's easy to feel so powerless, as though you have no ability to change things or make a difference. I actually had a conversation with my mom about this about a year and a half ago, when all of this was starting. It was about tikkun olam, about making an impact on the world. My goal has been to make a positive impact. It doesn't have to be on the nation or the state. Even the individual people I meet, I hope to give them a sense that they're heard, they're supported, that people want to hear their stories.

Not only that, how much the Jewish community has given me over the years. I remember going to the synagogue with my grandpa and my bubbe, and I used to play the alef bet game with my grandpa. I'd have to find all the alefs in the Torah. Going to Rodfei Zedek, I was so young that I wouldn't know anyone's name, but people would say, "I remember when you were born." People coming up to me, the warmth of people hugging each other, touching the books to the Torah. The experience at Rodfei Zedek and in the Jewish community – I've always felt accepted. I've always felt so Jewish on the inside, and I think a lot of that is because of just how accepted I felt. That has made me want to pay forward what the Jewish community has given me and make it even more inclusive and give other people the ability to feel accepted into this community full of songs and love and family.

Amelie grew up in Hyde Park with her siblings, Genevieve, and Asher, and parents Dr. Dana Suskind and the late Dr. Donald Liu. She attended preschool at Akiba Schechter and religious school at KAMII. As is the custom in her family, her bat matzvah was conducted in Los Angeles by her uncle, a cantor. Amelie is a senior at the U. of C. Lab School.

Amelie's bubbe, Leslie Lewinter-Suskind and her husband Dr. Robert Suskind have attended Rodfei Zedek for over twenty years. Leslie's background is in social research. She's written plays and short stories and coauthored The Malnourished Child (1990) and Textbook of Pediatric Nutrition (1993) with Robert.

Kenneth Moss



What attracted you to your field in the first place?

I was raised in a household with a very strong, and somewhat offbeat, set of Jewish commitments and Jewish identity. Both of my parents came from fairly typical Jewish backgrounds that did not involve a lot of learning. They were very learned people in a secular sense – my father was a professor of chemistry, and my mother is a medical doctor. They had come from households with strong Jewish commitments and very little Jewish learning and they sort of made up their own version of Jewish life. There was a lot of Jewish literature on the shelves. There was a very strong connection to Israel, but one that was mediated by personal contact. They had very good friends who had made aliyah, and they had friends through my father's work in the chemistry world in Israel. They had a connection to a Conservative shul. I was bar mitzvahed at a Conservative shul in New Jersey, *Neve Shalom*. So those were all the coordinates of a Jewish household that imbued me with a strong interest and engagement. I have no hesitation to say that my interest in Jewish studies stemmed very directly from my own upbringing.

My interests in Jewish life evolved in adolescence and early adulthood, turning toward studying Hebrew and

Yiddish culture. Not accidentally, I became very interested in essentially secular forms of Jewish cultural creativity. Not quite simultaneously, serially but in close proximity, I got very interested in both Hebrew language – modern culture, the culture that would ultimately become more or less the dominant culture of Israel, although that's changing rapidly – and then also Yiddish culture in a very secular, secularist form. Those scholarly interests stem very directly from some of my extra-scholarly commitments and interests. One hopes that you transmute your personal interests into real scholarship rather than simply elaborating in false form your personal interests. I think I did, but I don't have any illusions that my research interests don't grow out of my personal interests.

In your teaching experience what kind of people come to these studies; are they all Jewish?

No. I've been a teacher now for eighteen years, most of it at Johns Hopkins. I offer a regular cycle of general introduction to modern Jewish history followed by a variety of focused seminars, but none of them are organized around the particular cultural interests that brought me into Jewish studies, although those may appear. I try, with great success I think, to make my Jewish history classes resonate with topics that should interest anyone interested in the modern period.

I don't ask students what their background is, but we all have a kind of sociological radar; and I would say that my classes have generally ranged from 60% to 80% Jewish. I don't know about here yet; we'll see. But at Hopkins the introductory history classes drew greater numbers of non-Jewish students as they got a reputation for being serious classes about modern history, through a Jewish lens. Of course, whenever I teach about Israel and Israel and Palestine-related stuff, I get a much less heavily Jewish population, many more students who are not Jewish but come to it because it's in the news and seems like an area they want to know about – political science students and those sorts of folks.

Most of my teaching has not focused on these questions of Jewish cultural identity and creativity, but actually here in Chicago I'm in a funny situation, and I think a promising situation. Chicago has a very highly developed set of core courses. All students are required to take a whole variety of courses in particular topical and methodological areas. One of these requirements is called the "Civ," the civilization requirement. And one of the many forms of Civ that is offered at Chicago is Jewish civilization. So for the first time this past quarter I taught Jewish civilization. By no means do I hope that only Jewish students will take it. This is my chance to teach much more squarely on the kind of Jewish cultural and intellectual life that modern times have brought, a chance to teach a little bit outside the framework of a narrowly defined history class. I'm excited about continuing to develop that aspect of my teaching.

In your classes have you confronted friction between students over Palestine?

Not yet; I'm sure that will come. My classes on Israel and Palestine have been multiple and various. Several times I've taught a class on Jewish history in British mandatory Palestine. I've taught a class on history of Israel from its inception to the 70s. I've taught a class at Hopkins on the contemporary scene approached through the historical lens, focused quite explicitly on both Jewish and Palestinian life in the state of Israel and the occupied territories and Gaza, that whole complex place. Actually in each of those cases I think I approached the class on the assumption that there would be quite a lot of strife, and in general there hasn't been. Insofar as I can take any credit for that it's because I try and emphasize to students that I assume they're interested in these questions for reasons that have a lot to do with their personal outlook, their personal concerns, questions that are far beyond the very dry scholarly thing that I bring to something like ancient Sumerian history. I tell them it's not my place to tell them what they ought to think nor is it really useful for them to spend their time and anyone else's time in class playing out debates. It's a chance for everybody to read intensively. I also tend to give a lot of reading in those classes – I give a lot of reading anyway – but I give a lot of reading in those classes basically to drive away anyone who's there for headlines. I tell students this is your chance, maybe your only chance, to read quite a lot about something that interests you and try and get some better understanding of it. Have the debates in the hallways.

They may as well try to figure out something about these people and this place using the tools of scholarly inquiry. So far there's been relatively little of what you might expect when you teach these classes. We'll see.

What about the University of Chicago brought you here?

My wife and I had been at Hopkins for many years. We both had the opportunity to take jobs here, and we were really quite ready to go. The timing was good. Our oldest boy just started college, so he was already out the door; and our two others were ready to make a transition. We have a second boy, Aaron, who's going into tenth grade; but he hadn't ever really set foot in his new school in ninth grade because of Covid so he was also in a kind of limbo. Our little one, Celia is only eight and she actually was most concerned of all the kids about the move. But she's, happily, very out-going and adept at making friends. We never really had any concern, and she's settled in quite nicely. So all the pieces were right for this kind of move.

I had a wonderful department at Johns Hopkins, a wonderful history department, a wonderful Jewish studies program. But I'd been there for many years, and the idea of moving to a much

bigger place with a much more variegated intellectual life was very attractive for us.

Do you see your studies as responding to current world issues, such as Putin's war on Ukraine?

There's been a significant shift in my attention from a first book project and everything that goes with that. For historians it takes many years to produce these books. There is a lot of reading and immersion and a lot of articles that are produced around the kind of reading you're doing. The first trajectory of my study, as I said before, was really very much focused on worlds that Jews wanted to make, worlds of Hebrew culture and Yiddish culture. Many of the things Jews who created in those lan-guages

wanted didn't come to fruition, but my focus was on the ways in which Jewish ideas and ideologies gave birth to new cultural forms and new cultural possibilities. And my second line of research, which has culminated now in this recently published book, *An Unchosen People*, is much darker than that. It's true, it's much more about the opposite dimension of modern Jewish experience in Eastern Europe, which is realizing that whatever you may wish to

Books by Ken

An Unchosen People: Jewish Political Reckoning in Interwar Poland (2021).

Jewish Renaissance in the Russian Revolution (2009)

National Renaissance and International Horizons, 1880–1918 (Volume 7 of the Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization, edited with Israel Bartal)

From Europe's East to the Middle East: Israel's Russian and Polish Lineages (edited with Benjamin Nathans and Taro Tsurumi, 2021)

be the case, you actually don't have the power to make it so. You face real problems, perhaps great dangers, you can't quite know. You might ask, what kind of Jewish cultural thought emerges among those who come to conclude that the Jewish community in Eastern Europe really can't expect a happy outcome and a fulfilling future in Eastern Europe and maybe, in fact, faces something far worse than that, and there's really nothing much Jews can do about it in any way that will fundamentally transform the fate of the whole community. Perhaps they can only transform the fate of a minority within the community, of some individuals.

So that's a very dark turn in my work, and there's no question in my mind that that was... it wasn't driven by the Trump phenomenon and its international equivalents, but that certainly helped to snap things into focus. One of the things I also realized in studying Polish Jews, was that they were not only wrestling with the curdling of all their hopes, with the sense that they were in a bad spot and couldn't do much about it. They were seeing a shift in models. They had lived with relatively liberal political institutions, forms of citizenship, forms of rights. Polish Jews had rights. There was a Polish constitution. There were more or less free and fair elections. There were all these sorts of things. But now they could see, of course more so in other European societies further to their south and to their west, Germany, Rumania, and places like that, they could see how quickly and how toxically marginal right-wing politics could move to the center of the political sphere and change the calculus of what was appropriate in

politics, make possible quite far-reaching ideas of excluding Jews or worse. Those were things that our own present-day situation sadly helped snap into focus for me.

As regards Putin's horrible war against Ukraine, I'm not really sure that my work has much to offer. I'm as glued to the radio as everybody else. The Jewish case is a funny case. It's really the case of a middle-man minority, that just increasingly seems to more and more people to be taking up a place that belongs to the real nation. In the crudest possible sense that's the shared outlook of a whole variety of Eastern European nationals vis à vis Jews. That kind of sensibility is not really at stake in this conflict. Insofar as I'm a scholar of nationalism, I believe we're looking at a particular variant of at least a nationalist justification for completely unprovoked war. Putin certainly uses a particular kind of revanchist and resentment-laden Russian nationalism, a nationalism of a former great power; but I'm not sure that has much to do with Eastern European context. I think, rather terrifyingly, probably the closest example of something like it is inter-war German nationalism: We're a great power. We have every right to shape the world around us as we see fit. That's been taken from us by all sorts of baleful powers and we're going to show our neighbors what's what. That's not a particularly Jewish story, actually.

Many people have been depressed in the past few years and have tried to avoid facing troubling news. Yet you have been engaged in this dark material. Do you have advice for how to cope?

I don't really have a clear answer, I'm afraid. I didn't enjoy writing this book. I enjoyed writing the first book. All those cultural endeavors were shadowed by all kinds of tragedies, but I enjoyed spending time with writers and artists and people thinking to create something new. I felt a kind of obligation and a deep respect for people I studied in my second book, but – what can I say – it was not a lot of fun. (Why should historians have more fun than anyone else?) It sounds kind of pretentious to say this, but I don't mean it that way: I'm not sure that I've chosen my topics as much as they've chosen me. This was a topic that seemed to me important to think about. I don't think I anticipated how long it would take. All of my colleagues would say the same thing, that they choose topics they think are important to reflect on and important to investigate without in any way presuming that it's their right only to study the things that are pleasant. But why we should inflict this on other people, I don't know. I don't think, alas, there's any kind of easy answer to give about the lessons of history, why should we write these things or read these things. Professional historians working in the academy have the kind of, not the luxury, but at least the clarity to know it isn't that we're writing for each other, but we're trying to get the account of what happened right. We want to shape how something will be taught for a generation or so. Our most realistic hope of shaping anything lies in the way in which, as our colleagues read our work, they will shift the way they think and the way they teach and the way they write. So there's a kind of effect which spills out rather indirectly into teaching.

What can someone get from my book? I think many Jewish readers are interested in knowing how to think about our recent past in Eastern Europe. So many of us have those roots. So much of that story weighs on us and intrigues us. My sense is that there might be a reservoir of interest in getting acquainted with these people, understanding the situation they were in and how they strove to do something about it. These were people who at least tried to think about, to attain some clarity about their situation. I find them very admirable and their story very moving.

People now often feel helpless. Maybe looking at your stories will push us away from that desperation.

Maybe, or maybe the opposite! I don't want to false advertise. While I've been doing this I've also had the privilege of coediting – with a former dean of Hebrew University, a great historian named Israel Bartal – a wonderful, huge, sprawling anthology of global Jewish culture in all genres and varieties, a 1000-page anthology from 1880 to 1918. That's a lot of fun. So we find places to have fun.

You work with Yiddish in your academic life. Do you have some sort of Yiddish experience outside of your work?

Very much so. Anne and I live our home lives and have raised our children exclusively in Yiddish. We're all in. The kids speak Yiddish, they read Yiddish.

Did you grow up knowing Yiddish?

No, no, no. I wish I had. That was something that I came to initially through academic channels. I began to study Yiddish seriously in college having already done pretty extensive ulpan and mechina training in Hebrew. One of my early teachers was Mordkhe Schaechter, a great Yiddish linguist and teacher. He was a very devoted Yiddishist, part of a scene, then mostly in New York although already kind of national and global. I didn't know it existed when I first started studying. It was a world of people who tried to live their lives, their family lives at least, and cultural lives in Yiddish. Many of them obviously had some fairly recent roots in Eastern Europe, but not all. I fell in with that crowd – that was a long time ago – and reoriented my study of Yiddish from a purely scholarly study to really trying to achieve fluency in the language. Anne got involved, too, and learned Yiddish very much on her own from some of the circles we were moving in. By the time we had kids it had already been almost a decade of pretty intensive engagement in this small but lively scene. By the time we had kids, speaking to them in Yiddish, rather than a crazy idea, was a kind of the obvious thing to do. We'd spent all this time doing it; we talked to each other in Yiddish; we had all these circles of friends who were engaged in the same thing. By the time Isaac came along – or Yitshok Leyb – it was just sort of natural to try and do that.

And we did. And we continue to do so. What will come of it ... the kids will decide what will come of it for them. For now they're pretty literate in Yiddish. They read complex texts. They speak to us in Yiddish. Their Yiddish is pretty good, although certainly American English is a heavy weight. Some things are hard to transmit, but they do a great job. That's part of our family life. We're connected to a variety of other families. One thing we regret about leaving Baltimore – in general we're happy to be here – is that in Baltimore we had two other families that were doing the same thing, and we had an intensive cooperative relationship with them, a kind of Sunday class that we'd all do together. That's not something that we have here, so we'll have to think about substitutes for it.

After earning his PhD from Stanford University, Ken Moss held the Felix Posen Chair in Modern Jewish History at Johns Hopkins University and served as director of the Jewish Studies Program there. This past year he moved to the University of Chicago, where he serves as the Harriet and Ulrich E. Meyer Professor of Jewish History and his wife, Anne Eakin Moss, joined the Department of Slavic Languages & Literatures, focusing on Russian literature and cinema.

Cumulonimbus Calvus

by Joseph G. Peterson

The following is excerpted from Joe's novel Memorandum from The Iowa Cloud Appreciation Society, due to be published by the University of Iowa Press in November, 2022.



Snow sifted down. It moved this way and that. For a while, Moore tried to track a single snowflake against the blur of other snowflakes in the storm. There's one—follow that one. There it is. No, there. No, that's it.

Okay, that one there. Follow that one. It's slowly falling fluffily falling, wait now an updraft has it, now it's caught in a vicious downdraft. Wait—where did it go? I lost it in the tumult of the storm.

It was the duck and the rabbit phenomenon, Moore thought. He looked at the snow falling. Either you followed a single flake drifting this way and that, or you saw great volumes of snow flowing on currents of air, but it was impossible to follow both. It was either the duck: the single snowflake; or the rabbit: the great volume of snow being pushed on currents of air.

He also thought of Heisenberg and his great principle of uncertainty. Moore had first learned of this principle in college and he hadn't explored it beyond the class where the idea was first presented to him, but the idea that you could say either where a subatomic particle was or where it was going but

you couldn't say both — that you could only see one side of reality: the duck, for instance, or the other side, the rabbit—thrilled him.

It thrilled him on two accounts that you could know reality with incredible precision from one vantage point, but from another vantage point it was absolutely inscrutable. Moore loved that word, "inscrutable." In these times, Moore thought, what is needed is that which is inscrutable.

In a moment of time, harnessing a confluence of technologies, Google and other tech corporations too familiar to name had mapped, connected, and perceived the world with such completeness that the unknown world, the unexplored and hidden parts of it, seemed banished forever from our purview. The unknown no longer existed. With a touch on your device you could zoom to a rock pile on the side of Mt. Everest and see in fine detail the lichen growing on the rock and maybe even the footprint of a departed hiker.

Every part of the globe had seemingly been investigated; what had once seemed vast and unscalable—the Earth—was now described as a small, fragile ecosystem no longer containing lost unmapped places. It was bad enough, when, in the atomic age, it was thought that we could blow the place

up—but even then it was a world with large swaths of unknown frontier. Now it was no longer so. From the vast deserts to the deep ocean trenches—not a jot of the Earth was left unexplored.

Scientists lived on both poles determining to a fine point how much longer the ice mantle would last in this ever-warming cocoon where conflagrations of fires raged, volcanoes erupted, ever-massive storms disabled human populations and released energy into the skies. But think of it: it was only one hundred years ago when the poles, against great adversity, had first been reached and now open water and arctic shipping lanes have replaced the thousands of miles of pack ice that polar explorers once marched across. It seemed too surreal to believe, that the ice was on the verge of a great melt and soon it would be a memory, and yet such was the case.

The once limitless equatorial forests that ringed the Earth were also being ruthlessly bulldozed under and torched only to be replaced and superseded by arid ranch land, or illicit drug crops, or sugar plantations, or lumberyard forest or surface mines that leveled the mountains or oil fields that besmirched the land, and on and on the deprecations went faster by the day. It was hard for Moore to read about all this stuff but he told himself that he must read about it. He took it as a solemn moral responsibility to keep up on how jungles were rapidly disappearing, the oceans befouled, the air black-stained by carbon toxins, and the ice caps liquidated.

As a result of the reduction of the Amazon rain forest, for instance, remote indigenous tribes were fast disappearing and even at this moment stories abounded in the newspapers and National Geographic magazine of one indigenous man in particular. He has been, for the past few decades, the last surviving member of his tribe and, aging without a spouse, he has no hope of recapitulating himself in a new generation. He lives alone in some remote region of the Amazon and scientists and ecotourists gather just out of range of the indigenous man monitoring his movements.

How does he seem to himself is the question . . . as alone in a vast untrammelled wilderness? Or does he realize that he inhabits a small protected patch of the Amazon that has been protected just for him and that all of his relatives are disappeared?

Moore read the story and tried to imagine himself as the last indigenous man of the Amazon wilderness, but in point of fact, it made Moore so unhappy and sad he stopped nearly as soon as he started. We're just like that guy, Moore thought: the wilderness of our own unfoundedness is gone, and now we are exposed for all to see.

In another instance, Moore read a valedictory story of a population of a few thousand lowland gorillas that had been discovered deep in the Rwandan rain forest. This discovery was greeted with relief: not just that there were a few more thousand gorillas than were previously thought to exist but that there could still be undiscovered populations of anything—and particularly of megafauna

hidden in the forests whose hiddenness was still extant in this day and age.

Wildlife that had roamed the Earth had now been pushed to the margins and lived largely in protected national parks that were always under threat from poachers, farmers, and villagers, and those creatures that didn't make it into the parks were endlessly nearing the brink of extinction: they were hunted down to populations of single digits for their teeth or their tusks, for their horns or their hide. They were hunted to be stuffed like pillows and hauled back like tchotchkes to the hearth and home fire to fuel a conversation among guests of how the hunt had proceeded by guide and jeep and high-powered rifle and completed all before ten a.m. and then flown out by helicopter over Mt. Kilimanjaro.

The thought that evolution would continue to work on the remaining vestiges of wildlife on the planet to produce new species in the future seemed all but unlikely to Moore. Factory farms and mining both on land and at sea had put an end to notions of wilderness that existed only a generation ago. Now the oceans had been turned into factory farms where the last wild populations of fish were being harvested for sushi connoisseurs in deep landlocked urban centers. The wilderness and vast untrammelled diversity of fishes of the ocean exchanged for a plate of sushi to anyone in a mall who wanted to eat sushi on a Tuesday night! It all seemed unbelievable, but as Moore understood it, it was all too true.

Big Brother as Orwell imagined him would be wonderful, Moore thought; bring him back. Instead, we have a shrunken overpopulated planet. We have credit cards, GPS tracing systems, and the information trail that we leave like flotsam in the digital seas of the internet that keep track of our every move: all of these observance systems seemed more benign than Orwell imagined them, but what was truly frightening about them was that they were so successful and comprehensive in their observance that no dark unmapped space or action escaped their viewing. And should some strongman one day grab hold of this information, then what is benign—birthday wishes on social media and the connections of hundreds of unknown friends gabbing away without guile for all the world to see—might reduce us to enemies of the state. What we willingly put out there of ourselves in the digital universe was more human record than any previous autocrat in history could dream of having on us.

But more worrisome than that, it was as if technology itself were replacing the living.

And though it wasn't true yet, nevertheless it seemed that the great variety and amplitude of diverse living things was being tilled under, and a monoculture of humans and ants seemed likely the only species to exist in a few generations.

There were times Moore tried to imagine that the great intergenerational conversation between humans was broken by some calamity like Noah's Flood except maybe without Noah. He

imagined the emergent generation without a linguistic connection or a historical road map to the remains that we left behind. Imagine some group of people with no connection—like that indigenous man, for instance, in the Amazon rain forest or some gnomish woodsman who only knew of the woods—imagine him or someone like him coming upon all of this then: the signs would be inscrutable, the machines and what purposes they were meant for would be impossible to divine, and the story of how it all came to be, of what it was all for and why? This story would be unknown and these questions would have no answer: they would be unfathomable and bottomless.

Moore imagined the universe tilting back to its own ignorance; it was the opposite pole from the direction we were headed and Moore wanted to go back that way a little bit. He wished for a little bit of that which was undiscovered, untrammelled, and unnamed; the unknowable and unquantifiable things that nevertheless brings value and comfort beyond words. The duck and the rabbit; himself versus the crowds. He was at once a single, perishable, one-of-a-kind human with dark unknown dreams and thoughts of his own and yet he was a meaningless part of the blizzard; an endless iteration of the same human pattern and yet, at heart, he felt he was different—a new thing—and he felt this way if for no other reason than he

had dreams that no one but he could experience; he had interior thoughts and emotions, feelings and sensations: a vast interior weather system of history and memory and connections that even he was only remotely conscious of but that was as vast as the weather system right there out-of-doors.

Sometimes it registered as an internal hum, sometimes as a howl, other times as a low unsung melody that made him unique in ways that were inexpressible and unknown to all.

I am me, Moore thought. I am Jim Moore. I travel and will continue to do so until I drop. I am unique. I am inscrutable. No one knows what I dream, or what he dreams, Moore thought, looking over at the man with the McDonald's meal. I'm every bit as unique and inscrutable as is that guy right across from me. That big guy right there across the gate stuffing his face with French fries.

Joseph G. Peterson received his B.A. in philosophy from the University of Chicago. He currently works in publishing at the University of Chicago Press. He is the author of several novels. The story, Two Deaths Foretold, appears in his latest book, Ninety-Nine Bottles, which was published in July 2019. He and his family live in Hyde Park and have been members of Rodfei Zedek for 20 years.

Yehuda Amichai's Last Poems:

פתוח סגור פתוח - Open Closed Open

presented by Rabbi Larry Edwards



In Prague there is an old Jewish cemetery that historian Rachel Greenblatt has described as a treasury of clues about the Jewish past. One of the inscriptions she cites (along with a photograph of the marker from 1576) reads like a poem:

Nehama wife of Shalom Uri
Buried on Sunday, the 11th of Tevet
5337 This stone is a witness
between us:
That death has climbed up into our
window:
And eclipsed the light of our eyes:
Our mother the crown of our
head:
A woman who fears God, she will
be praised:
It is impossible to complete the
telling of all her praises:
The angels of mercy went out to
greet her:
Her soul is bound in the bond of
life:
In the G[arden of] E[den] Amen.

That final *amen* (from the same Hebrew root as *emunah* – faith, trust, honesty, truth: see the Maimonidean formulation,

Ani ma'amin b'emunah shleimah – I believe with perfect faith...) figures prominently in the poetry of Yehuda Amichai. An earlier collection is titled simply, *Amen*. Amichai is well aware of Maimonides, to whom he refers with his characteristic theological irony: "I declare with perfect faith / that prayer preceded God."

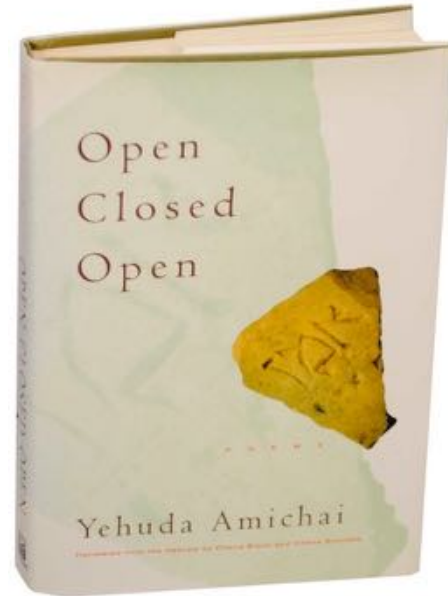
Historians and poets, in very different ways, transmit culture. Aristotle suggests that the historian relates what has happened, while the poet describes what may happen. Historian Greenblatt describes her work, based on close examination and analysis of physical evidence, as "located at a juncture between ... the history of memory and the history of death." Amichai, reviewing life experience with a more inward contemplation, intensifying as he becomes increasingly mindful of mortality, is also "conscious of his role as a mediator of cultural memory" [Bloch and Kronfeld].

Amichai's final collection was published in Hebrew in 1998 and represents almost ten years of work. The English translation, by Chana Kronfeld and Chana Bloch, came out in 2000, the year of the poet's death. On the cover of both the Hebrew and English editions appears a picture of a gravestone fragment containing the single Hebrew word *amen*.



Several poems in *Open Closed Open* refer to that amen stone, a motif that runs through the volume. In one of the “amen” poems Amichai tells us that the stone comes “from a Jewish graveyard / destroyed a thousand years ago in the town where I was born.” So this fragment, which sits on the poet’s desk, is from Würzburg, Germany. From the opening poem of the collection we are to understand that it had been given to Amichai by a German “sad good man” who gathered broken shards of Jewish gravestones, cleaned them, photographed them, and attempted to make a record of what could never be restored.

The “amen” of a gravestone sitting on his desk suggests a *memento mori*, “Remember you must die.” This is an artistic tradition stretching far back in



time. Most commonly a skull (I picture Hamlet contemplating the skull of Yorick) or an hourglass or a fading flower. For Amichai, it is this remnant of his old world, migrated to his desk in Jerusalem.

Rabbi Steven Sager, may he be remembered for blessing, in discussing these amen poems of Amichai, commented on the possible valences of the word: “Was this *amen* angry, defiant, hopeful, mournful, meditative, accepting? The tone might change, but the word remained forever fixed—a sure and certain response of a community to the experience of loss.”

The final iteration of the Amen poems occupies the last page of the collection. The translators rightly describe it as “the most unsettling of the Amen poems.”

The Jewish Time Bomb

פצצת הזמן היהודית

On my desk is a stone with "Amen" carved on it, one survivor fragment
of the thousands of bits of broken tombstones
in Jewish graveyards. I know all these broken pieces
now fill the great Jewish time bomb
along with the other fragments and shrapnel, broken Tablets of the Law
broken altars broken crosses rusty crucifixion nails
broken houseware and holyware and broken bones
eyeglasses shoes prostheses false teeth
empty cans of lethal poison. All these broken pieces
fill the Jewish time bomb until the end of days.
And though I know about all this, and about the end of days,
the stone on my desk gives me peace.
It is the touchstone no one touches, more philosophical
than any philosophers's stone, broken stone from a broken tomb
more whole than any wholeness,
a stone of witness to what has always been
and what will always be, a stone of amen and love.
Amen, amen, and may it come to pass.

על שלחני יש אבן שחרות עליה "אמן", שבר אחד
נצול מאלפי רבוא שבירי מצבות שבורות
בבתי קברות יהודיים. ואני יודע שכל השברים האלה
ממלאים עכשו את פצצת הזמן היהודית הגדולה
עם שאר שבירים ורסיסים, שבירי לוחות הברית
ושבירי מזבחות ושבירי צלבים ומסמרי צליבה חלודים
עם שבירי כלי בית וכלי קדש ושבירי עצמות,
ונעלים ומשקפים ואיברים מלאכותיים ושנים תותבות
וקפסות פח ריקות של רעל משמיד. כל אלה
ממלאים את פצצת הזמן היהודית עד אחרית הימים,
ואף-על-פי שאני יודע על כל אלה ועל אחרית הימים
האבן הזאת על שלחני נותנת לי שלום
היא אבן אמת שלא יהיו לה הופכין,
אבן חכמה מכל אבן חכמים, אבן ממצבה שבורה
והיא שלמה מכל שלמות.
אבן עדות על כל הדברים שהיו מעולם
ועל כל הדברים שיהיו לעולם, אבן אמן ואהבה.
אמן, אמן וכן יהי רצון.

The “unsettling” element of the poem is certainly the image of the time bomb, the “what may happen.” What is inside, stored up over all of history, is waiting to explode. Are Jews themselves an unsettled element of human history? Do we, by our very existence or by our covenantal calling, continue to stir the pot, despite our longing for peace (*shalvah*) and love (*ahavah*) and wholeness (*shleimut*)?

Amichai left Germany in his youth and came to Palestine. There he fought in three wars. And even as Israel’s best-known and much-loved poet, resident in Jerusalem, he knew that the peace he longed for and spoke up for remained a distant dream. As long as redemption remains out of reach, the fragments of

shattered history threaten to explode at any time.

The poem itself explodes from the small stone to a cascade of dark symbols and historical fragments: Holocaust images of piles of shoes and eyeglasses and cannisters of poison gas, the shrapnel left from countless wars, Christian references (with Jewish resonance) to “broken crosses” and “rusty crucifixion nails.”

And yet the poet, contemplating his “Amen stone,” feels a sense of peace despite loss. It reminds me of the Talmudic tradition that the broken pieces of the first set of tablets were also carried in the ark (Babylonian Talmud Baba

Batra 14b). Though no longer readable, their holiness remains.

The broken *memento mori* offers a sense of wholeness. Indeed, this remnant seems to the poet “more whole than any wholeness.” It might call to mind the teaching of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk: “There is nothing more whole than a broken heart.”

The unsettling potential of an unexploded bomb haunts, not just below the surface but quite visibly present. Despite this, “Amen,” says the poet, “amen and love.” And if we wish to reach for some sense of hope, we might also recall the teaching of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav: “If you believe that it is possible to break, then believe also that it is possible to repair.”

An addendum: The Fast of Av this year (2022) overlapped, as it sometimes does, with Hiroshima Day (August 6th).

This poem was read between chapters of Lamentations. In the brief ensuing discussion, it was pointed out that among the scientists who worked on the Manhattan Project were quite a few Jews. Though Amichai does not mention this in the poem, might this also be an aspect of “The Jewish Time Bomb”?

Rabbi Laurence Edwards is Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Or Chadash. He was a Hillel Director (Dartmouth and Cornell) and has served several other congregations, including, in 2014, Rodfei Zedek. He has worked for the American Jewish Committee (Inter-religious Affairs), and recently retired from teaching at the University of Illinois at Chicago, at De Paul, and at Hebrew Seminary in Skokie. Larry is married to Susan Boone, who retired from administrative work at the University of Chicago.

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In Spite of a Pandemic –

This last year saw continuation – action for social justice

intensification – more bar and bat mitzvah celebrations than in many years
and innovation – reconfiguration of the Sanctuary.



The Congregation hosts a Love Fridge, a Chicago-based mutual aid initiative fighting food insecurity by placing community refrigerators across the city. Since we unveiled our Love Fridge in November it has been used extensively. A cohort of members work hard to keep the fridge clean and stocked with goods, including Rabbi Larry Edwards and Susan Boone, Meg Schwartz, Ezra Serrins, Mark Sorkin, Miriam Friedman-Parks and Stephanie Friedman, Beth and Miriam Niestat, Andrew Skol and Yael Hoffman. And this spring Verdit Szmulewitz painted it!

The Congregation partners with the Night Ministry, which provides housing, health care, outreach, spiritual care, and social services to adults and youth who struggle with homelessness, poverty, and loneliness.
(Right: Mark Sorkin, Ron Blumenthal, Barbara Blumenthal, Jeffrey Kratowicz, and Joyce Riffer helped pack meals.)



This year we celebrated with Benny Szmulewitz, Marty Schwartz, Nathan Polonsky, Ceci Landes, Hannah Bueno de Mesquita, Isaac (Izzy) Deegan, Ronen Malani, Elias Laurence, Lily Devir, Simon Vaang, Orlie Weitzman, Iris Strahilevitz, and Norah and Sarah Franklin.

(Left: Benny Szmulewitz. Far left: Elias Laurence with his uncle, John Oppenheimer)

photos of the Rodfei Zedek Community



Work on the Sanctuary progressed smoothly under careful and energetic supervision by the Sanctuary Re-imagination Sub-committee, Stacey Hamburg, Chuck Rosenberg, and Daniel Blumenthal. They supervised every element of the project from an initial survey of members' needs and preferences through redesign, repair, rebuilding, and refurnishing.

Under Your Wing: In Memory of Anatoliy Usha

by Benjamin Usha



Едыом ееграт шачмати
(*Edyom egrat shachmati*)
Let's go play chess!

With these three words, my Dyedushka (grandfather) Tolya would summon me to play chess almost every day up until the very day before he passed away. Playing chess had always been one of the foundations of our relationship as grandfather and grandson.

Dyedushka cherished the ancient board game; both his father, Leon, and his brother, Valentine, had played chess with him many years ago back in Leningrad. Dyedushka frequently recalled that Valentine had almost become a chess grandmaster by the time he was a young man. But everything changed during World War II. Dyedushka told me how when war broke out between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, Valentine was drafted into the Red Army while Leon volunteered to fight on the frontlines. Dyedushka, being too young to fight, stayed back home in Leningrad with his mother, Sopha. At the outset of the hostilities between the two powers in 1941, Nazi Germany laid siege to Leningrad in an event that became known as the *blokada*. At the start of the siege, Leningrad had a population of about 2.5 million, 300,000 of whom were Jewish. The *blokada*, lasting almost 900 days, took a great toll on Leningrad and its inhabitants: bombs regularly devastated the city, food was severely

rationed to 150 grams of bread, utilities often did not work in times of need, and moving in and out of the city became a perilous endeavor. Ultimately, the *blokada* claimed around one million lives.

Dyedushka and Sopha endured the brutal winter from 1941 to 1942. Dyedushka often shared with me his lifelong sense of gratitude toward his mother; he felt that he could not have survived the *blokada* without her. Before the *blokada*, she had prepared large canisters of lingonberry jam in anticipation of the war. When the *blokada* began and Leningrad residents received their meager bread rations, Sopha spread some of the jam on the bread to nourish Dyedushka as the suffocating siege and freezing winter coalesced into utter devastation upon the city. Sopha's nurturing care fortified Dyedushka while Nazi Germany menaced Leningrad's inhabitants, especially its Jewish residents. The German Army would drop pamphlets on the city encouraging residents to turn over their Jewish populations to stop the siege. Furthermore, whenever the German Army captured Leningrad's suburbs, the soldiers rounded up and killed entire communities of Jewish residents, perpetuating the Holocaust. What Dyedushka and so many other *blokadnikis* (*blokada* survivors) experienced shook them to their core.

Not long after the 1941-42 winter, Dyedushka and Sopha made their

treacherous escape from the *blokada* by riding in a jeep across the frozen Lake Ladoga right outside Leningrad. Riding on what became known as the Road of Life, subjected them to danger from German planes dropping bombs, which often sank entire jeeps and all their passengers. Dyedushka and Sopha were safely evacuated to Siberia and lived the rest of the war in a refugee camp. My Babushka (grandma) made a parallel escape from the *blokada*, although she and Dyedushka met each other only after the war. Dyedushka and Sopha would not be reunited with Leon or Valentine; both were declared missing in action, never to be found again despite Dyedushka's desperate efforts to find them after the war. The loss of his father and brother greatly impacted Dyedushka as he never forgot his family, remembering them until his final days.

As I grew up, I heard these war-time stories many times from both Dyedushka and my Babushka. When I was younger, Dyedushka and I used to ride on public transportation from our home on 31st Street and Michigan Avenue to Devon Avenue where there was a Russian-speaking community that Dyedushka was actively involved in. I remember how we would stop by the Chicago Association of Veterans of World War II from the U.S.S.R 's office on Troy Avenue to meet with other veterans. As one of the directors of the Association, Dyedushka would catch up with other members and discuss important matters that I often did not fully understand as a young child. Only later did I begin to realize the unique meaning of these stories and the impact my Dyedushka had on our community.

Dyedushka and the Association spearheaded a movement that led to the recognition of Jewish *blokadnikis* as Holocaust survivors by the Claims Conference. Prior to the movement, the public and many experts in Holocaust studies viewed the *blokada* as part of the wartime hostilities between Nazi Germany and the former Soviet Union, not within the scope of the Holocaust. Lack of recognition by the Claims Conference meant that *blokadnikis* who had become elderly with significant medical and caregiving needs would not be able to receive necessary aid conferred upon other Holocaust survivors.

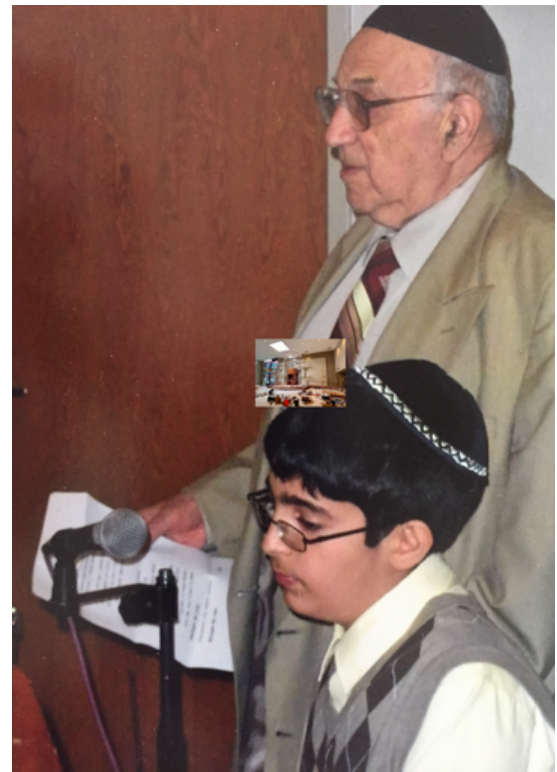
But the lack of recognition by the Claims Conference did not deter Dyedushka and other advocates in the community. Dyedushka rallied community members for the cause, wrote and sent letters to members of Congress, organized many petitions to the Claims Conference, published articles in Russian newspapers, and tenaciously advocated on behalf of *blokadnikis*. Nazi Germany had uniquely targeted Jewish residents of Leningrad. Jewish *blokadnikis*, who experienced significant trauma during the Siege, deserved equal recognition and material support alongside other Holocaust survivors. Dyedushka cared deeply about his community: I remember how he maintained a list of active members in the organization and contacted them from time to time to inform them, receive input on important issues, or even just to wish them a happy birthday. Thanks to the tireless efforts of Dyedushka and the entire community, the Claims Conference eventually recognized Jewish *blokadnikis* as Holocaust survivors and

distributed funds to Jewish *blokadnikis*, providing vital assistance for thousands of elders. As I reflect on these times, I realize how I inherited my character traits of advocacy and tenacity from Dyedushka.

Regarding my Jewish upbringing, Dyedushka told me how religious people in the former Soviet Union, including Soviet Jews, often faced tremendous personal risk if they were caught practicing their religion. Jews, however, faced additional risk and suspicion because they were treated as a separate nationality and endured pervasive institutional antisemitism. Both Dyedushka and Babushka had faced the antisemitic Soviet system their entire lives. Dyedushka and Babushka told me how they each had dreams in their respective careers that were taken away from them. Dyedushka studied Russian theater to become a theater critic while Babushka studied Russian philology to become a Russian language teacher and linguist. However, Russian theater and language were considered “ideological,” so Dyedushka and Babushka, not being Russians by “nationality” or ethnicity, were forbidden from working in fields within Russian “ideology.” Due to the antisemitic treatment, Dyedushka became an economist-engineer and Babushka became a math teacher instead.

As a recent graduate from law school, I am inclined to think that Soviet law would have been the ultimate “ideological” field: law is at the core of how government shapes society, so an authoritarian and antisemitic government could not afford the threat imposed by

Jews having legal training. My family certainly never knew of any Jewish lawyers in the former Soviet Union, a stark contrast to the United States where Jews are well represented and supported in the legal profession. Reflecting on this contrast helps me understand why my pursuit of law was a source of tremendous pride for Dyedushka: when I reminded him from time to time that I was in law school to become a lawyer, he would say “*eta horoshi spitzalnist*” (that’s a good specialty)!



Dyedushka with Ben at his bar mitzvah

Dyedushka often expressed to me that despite his own struggles as a Jew in the former Soviet Union, he had always been proud of his Jewish identity. Many Soviet Jews understandably tried to hide their Jewish identity by changing their nationality to “Russian” on their

passports. However, while Dyedushka was not free to practice Judaism, he expressed to me how he positively identified as a Jew his entire life and never hid his identity when living in the Soviet Union. Dyedushka's pride in his Jewish identity carried over when raising me in the United States. Dyedushka emphasized the importance of my Jewish education in the United States, an education that he had never had. Furthermore, Dyedushka began practicing Judaism in the United States, going to synagogue, celebrating Jewish holidays, and being my rock during my bar mitzvah here at Congregation Rodfei Zedek. To this day, I continue to hear Dyedushka reciting Kiddush in Russian whenever I do the same Friday night. Dyedushka's struggles with antisemitism and his unwavering commitment to Jewish identity instilled in me a profound appreciation for my freedom of religion and a deeply rooted sense of pride in my Jewish identity. On the evening before he passed away, we played a few games of chess with one another in the living room as was our custom. Though he was facing challenges with his physical and mental health, Dyedushka played strongly and as passionately as he always had. After playing we had some tea together in the kitchen. That evening, we talked about how Leon and Valentine had perished on the battlefield and how Sopha had prepared lingonberry jam that helped him survive the *blokada*. At one point in our conversation, he emotionally recalled the horrible antisemitism of the Nazis during World War II. I reminded him that how we had won the war against antisemitism, and I remember how the notion of victory over evil brought a sense of peace to Dyedushka. Later that night, Dyedushka

resisted getting into bed as he had immense difficulty breathing while lying down, but with persistence, I eventually encouraged him to lie down in bed and get some rest, before heading to bed myself.



The following morning, I woke up to my mom urgently asking me to come to Dyedushka's room as he had fallen, and he could not get back up. When we rushed over, I saw Dyedushka lying on the floor and heard him say "Lapa, pamogi mne" which meant Lapa (his nickname for me), please help me. His emotional cry for my help still pierces me to this day. I embraced him from behind and held him tight as we called and waited for paramedics. While waiting, Dyedushka continued to plead for help to stand up as he was struggling to breathe, so my mom, Dyedushka's caregiver, and I tried to help lift him back up. On the count of three, we started picking him up, gradually helping him stand. We would normally have put a chair behind him so that he could immediately sit down right after being picked up, but there was no chair that we could have put behind him,

and so we had to bring him back down to the ground. I continued holding him from behind, and just as we were trying to help him get back up, Dyedushka drew his final breaths, surrounded by his loved ones in his own home. I called out "Dyedushka! Dyedushka! Dyedushka!" but he gave no response, and my heart sank, crushed by the unbearable weight of the moment. When the paramedics arrived, we did not resuscitate him in accordance with his wishes, but we all felt the intense pain of letting him go.

Dyedushka died early the following morning. Before the undertaker came, I laid Dyedushka down in his room where he had fallen. Afterwards, I saw Dyedushka lying down right underneath a portrait of his mother Sopha, and I realized that wherever Dyedushka may have gone, I knew that he had reached a better place. From the bottom of my heart, thank You God for sheltering Dyedushka and Babushka, under Your Wings.

Benjamin Usha is the son of Lydia Usha and grandson of Rebecca Fradkin and Anatoliy Usha. He is a recent graduate of University of Illinois Chicago School of Law and a current applicant for the Illinois Bar. He is passionate about protecting the environment and aspires to have a career in environmental law and planning. He regularly attends synagogue services at Congregation Rodfei Zedek with his mother and has recently started chanting Torah again after a long post-Bar Mitzvah hiatus.

Words of Torah

by Marty Schwartz



Did you know Rabbi Minkus' bar mitzvah portion was also Mishpatim? I tried to buy his d'var Torah but he politely declined.

The root of *mishpatim* is *mishpat*, which means justice. This section of the Torah begins laying out the rules God expects the Israelites to follow. There are five main categories of rules the Israelites receive in Mishpatim:

How to treat servants and those who work for you

When to use capital punishment

How to deal with property and theft

The Israelites' duties to God

How to be a good human

Until this portion, the Torah has essentially been a long narrative story. We had stories in the preceding chapters about how the world was created, the conflicts with the matriarchs and patriarchs, and most recently the story of Exodus. With the parasha we read today, the Torah switches from story-telling to law-giving. The portion we read last week, Yitro, is where the Israelites received the Ten Commandments. That was the start of the transition from stories to rules. In a similar way to Mishpatim being a transition point between 'stories'

and 'laws;' so too my Bar Mitzvah marks a transition from childhood to adulthood.

There are many well-meaning rules in this portion, even if they contradict what we think of as a just society today. For instance, the first set of rules we receive in this portion deals with the least privileged and most vulnerable in the Israelite society: slaves. Most of us aren't fond of the idea of slavery. I think starting with those most in need of protection is the right place to start when building a society. And we can imagine the Israelites hoped to form a good society. I would like to think the 430 years they spent as slaves in Egypt was the reason God started with rules dealing with slaves. God wants the Israelites to reach their full potential and I think he recognizes that the slavery experience was fresh on their minds. He wants to make this relevant to the Israelites.

Some of the rules about how to be Jewish are the most interesting to me. For example, God demands the first of the crops and the best animals. This seems like a big price to pay emotionally. You work hard for these crops and then you just need to give them up? Is it a tax? This is the covenant, guidelines to build their society. I see this almost as a transaction – if the Israelites build a just society, then God says he will protect the Israelites if they pay his sacrifice tax.

Another interesting idea – God demands three pilgrimage festivals. Why does God demand these three parties a

year? It seems expensive, both literally and emotionally, to be a Jew. We just got out of 430 years of slavery, then spent 40 years wandering the desert. And now we have to drop everything three times a year for a pilgrimage festival? This God is a demanding god. It can also be expensive to do the right thing. We learn in this portion that if an Israelite makes a bad choice and steals something, he has to give it back AND pay double the price of the thing he stole. And that's before he's even paid the lawyer!

Even in the 3,000 years since this portion was originally heard in the world, being a Jew remains emotionally taxing. You are restricted from eating some foods. And I hear bacon is REALLY delicious.

But seriously, it is HARD to be a Jew. I am still not sure why we have the rules about keeping kosher. Getting ready for this bar mitzvah has been hard – I am learning a new language. I have to read and speak in that new language in front of a bunch of people. I have to get up here and give a d'var Torah, which isn't easy. This has been extra hard for me because I don't like speaking in front of people. BUT being Jewish is a little unique. There aren't many Jews. I am here to uphold a tradition, and I take pride in this tradition.

Marty is an 8th grader at Ancona. He enjoys baseball (go Cardinals!), fishing, history and golf. He's an OSRUI camper in the summers.

In their ten years at Rodfei Zedek Marty's mother Meg has served on the CRZ board and father Brian is on the Finance Committee. Meg is a nurse

practitioner at Northwestern in the neuro-oncology division and Brian is a CIO at Athena Bitcoin. Their daughter Ellie anticipates her bat mitzvah in two years.

by Cecilia Ly Rose Landes



My Torah portion refers to animals and the sacrifices we must make to God even though they cause us pain. They are a testament to our faith and to our

shared pain in this life.

My haftarah is a reflection on the Ark of the Lord and its transfer from the House of Obed-edom. The brothers in this tale did not understand the importance of the Ark of the Lord and were struck down. We must live our lives in respect and know when to offer help, and when not to. This is a tough thing for us to understand, as we think that all help is good, but sometimes our help is not necessary and it can be offensive, just as the brothers' help was offensive to God.

Maybe this is why David feared God, because he didn't want to offend. However we cannot live in fear of an explanation of the mystery of life. We cannot live in fear of things we have no control over, we have to trust that giving the power to God is beautiful, and human, and this surrender is part of the beauty of being human. In this way we can have control over our fears, which exist only in our minds. We can challenge them. We can get power over them.

This is easier to say than it is to do. In the context of our faith, what defines faith? Do we have to do exactly as the Torah commands? This is the constant question. When I think of Aaron's sons and the way they were struck down, I have to wonder why this would happen. They were showing they cared for God and the Israelites by wanting to make this special sacrifice and God killed them!!! If God is an all-knowing being, then why could God not see that their intentions were good? They were just priests who were trying to be good, and dedicate their lives to God. How should we feel about God now? How do we respect a Being who, at least here, does not seem to respect us?

On Yom Kippur we pray or we believe that God is forgiving – how come God was not forgiving of Nadav and Abihu? If He is all-knowing, why doesn't He see our intentions? This leaves me asking myself, what is Judaism? Rabbi Minkus asks me what being Jewish means to me, so I might as well answer the question. I feel fine with struggling if God is real or belief in general because to me Judaism is an essence, it is about community, it is about a philosophy on how to live life. Judaism tells us to question and to ask questions, and that is more important to me than sitting in synagogue for an hour and praying. Praying without an answer is frustrating but asking questions without an answer leads to more questions. In this way Judaism continues to grow in our lives as a living faith.

And it allows me to continue growing, and as I grow, I change and evolve and become a better person every

day. I stand before you all today, and promise to keep growing into the person I'm truly meant to be.

I wanted to share a small quote, dedicated to the people I'm about to speak about.

"Love is life. All, everything that I understand, I understand only because I love. Everything is, everything exists, only because I love. Everything is united by it alone. Love is God, and to die means that I, a particle of love, shall return to the general and eternal source."
— Leo Tolstoy

[Ceci ended with thanks to many family members and friends, concluding: "And most of all, I want to thank my mom who, despite not being Jewish, was the pilot light of my Jewish education.]"

Cecilia Ly Rose Landes, daughter of Joseph Landes and Truong Vu, began her Jewish education at the JCC Heller preschool in Lakeview. After her family moved to the south side she began attending both the Lab school and Jewish Enrichment Center. Her Bat Mitzvah, initially scheduled for March 13, 2021, had to be postponed a year because of the pandemic. This fall, Ceci will begin high school at the Chicago Academy for the Arts, where she will pursue her passion for writing and design.

by Lily Devir



My parasha, Naso, talks about a lot of things, like Nazarites, the census of the Levites, sacrifices given by the clans, and grapes? Yes, two pages talking about grapes. But, my parasha also has the priestly blessing. I will get to that later.

The Torah talks about the Nazarites and what a Nazarite is. A Nazarite is someone who makes a vow to God and brings God a sacrifice.

On the eighth day, that person will bring two turtledoves or two pigeons to the priest. A Nazarite must isolate and make a big announcement that he is becoming a Nazarite. A person could become a Nazirite for as long or as short of a time as he would like. During the time of being a Nazarite you do not: eat grapes, drink anything from grapes, or drink any intoxicants. You may not cut your hair or shave, and you must isolate yourself from everyone around you. If you see somebody die or come in contact with somebody who is sick, you have to start all over.

Long story short if you want to be a Nazarite you have to be extroverted so that you can make your big announcement in public and make the sacrifice to God but also introverted enough to be able to stay isolated from everyone without getting so lonely. By becoming a Nazarite you give up and miss out on a lot of things. This made

me think of COVID, especially at the beginning of it.

If you remember, the initial quarantine was only supposed to be two weeks but the virus spread so quickly that quarantine went from two weeks to almost two years. By staying inside we sacrificed a lot of things and missed out so that we would not get COVID. As the Nazarites had to quarantine to stay holy, we quarantined and wore masks through the worst of the pandemic so we could be safe. Just like the Nazirite's vow ending let's hope that all of our COVID quarantining will be over soon.

My parasha also has the priestly blessing:

God spoke to Moses: Speak to Aaron and his sons: Thus shall you bless the people of Israel. Say to them:

God bless you and protect you!

God deal kindly and graciously with you!

God bestows a divine favor upon you and grants you peace! Thus they shall link My name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them.

God says that he will deal graciously with the people of Israel, which means he will not make us perfect or treat us perfectly but he won't go out of his way to punish us or harm us. Everyone should think about that every day when we are with people even if you're not friends with them. You should never go out of your way to make somebody feel bad about themselves or to be rude to them. The Nazirites isolated

themselves and even if they decided to stop being a Nazirite that experience still brought them closer to God. Treating people graciously can bring you closer to God because you are being like God and treating others how God would treat them and how you want God to treat you.

Some things for you all to be thinking about are:

How did the Nazirites become better people when they were isolated? And

How did we become better people when we were isolated by COVID? One thing I hope is that we learned not to take things for granted.

One of the first things Rabbi Minkus asked me the second time we met was, What does being Jewish mean to me? And what does having a bat mitzvah mean to me? To me, this means becoming closer to and part of this amazing community, and it opens doors for new opportunities in the future.

Lily is an 8th grader at Akiba Schechter Jewish Day School. She loves animals, art, music and musicals, baking, making jewelry and riding her penny board and enjoys summers at Camp Young Judaea Midwest. Lily lives in Hyde Park with her parents, Hallie and Eric, and her two brothers, Noah and Eli. She is so proud to be added to the Na'aseh v'Nishma siddur dedication, following in the footsteps of both brothers.

by Orlie Weitzman



In Jewish tradition, we begin every day with grati-tude. Even before getting out of bed, we open our eyes and recite

מוֹדֶה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ

(modeh ani l'fanecha)

thanking God for restoring our souls to our bodies. So, in that spirit, before I say anything else, I would like to start by thanking each and every person here. Thank you for coming and for being part of this collective that we have here today. A bat mitzvah is not a celebration of an individual – but rather, of an individual joining a group, and you are my group. Toda Raba! Thank you!

The parasha for this week, is Re'eh, which means “look”.

רֵאָה, אֲנֹכִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֶיכֶם--הַיּוֹם:
בְּרָכָה, וּקְלָלָה.

(Re'eh, anochi noten lifnaychem hayom: bracha u'klala) “Look! Today I set before you a blessing and curse”. This is what Moshe tells the Israelites at the beginning of the parasha. Life will be a blessing for them if they follow the commandments and laws that God had instructed them to abide by and a curse if they turn to worshiping other gods. At this point in the story, the Israelites are about to enter into the promised land. And it's in the

promised land that they have to take on new responsibilities.

For example, when they were wandering in the desert, they were given food by God. In the promised land, they had to produce their own. In the desert, they were guided by a pillar of fire and a pillar of cloud. In the promised land, they had to figure out where to settle themselves, and how to split the land between the tribes. In the desert, they were told how to organize themselves. In the promised land, they were given more autonomy in deciding how that should work. We can see in this text the idea of a people being given independence and responsibility, and being given the chance to define their relationship, not just with God, but importantly with other people. To me, this is an important part of Judaism, that we think about our relationship with and our responsibility to others as much as we think about our individual connection with the divine.

So where does this leave me as a bat mitzvah? Well, the themes of responsibility, growing independence, and freedom to choose that can be found in this parasha also resonate with me as I am called to join as a member of the Jewish community. And sometimes there is a tension between these two things, choice and responsibility. Sometimes we are asked to do things that are difficult and we feel like postponing. I have to admit, there were times when I was learning how to read Hebrew, that it felt like an uphill struggle, certainly in the beginning. And sometimes I wondered, why was I trying so hard to decode this text, a text where the lives and values of the people in the stories are so different, and at times even at odds with my own world view.

But there is, I think, value and meaning in reading the stories of people who faced hardships and struggles, but who also celebrated and found joy and meaning in the world around them. These stories are my stories too. There is a significance in keeping these texts and rituals alive, because, I think, they give us a reference point outside of our immediate circumstances. They are stories of survival and humanity and a reminder of the importance of ritual to give meaning and structure to people's lives.

I know that during the early part of the pandemic when everything seemed turned upside down and we were all isolated at home, I found a lot of comfort in the rituals of Shabbat – lighting candles with my family, singing the familiar melodies, and having our usual Friday night dinner around the table. I found comfort knowing that Jewish communities in every part of the world were doing the same and reading the same parasha.

Dance was something that also brought a sense of structure, routine, and joy to me during the pandemic. I set up a ballet barre in my room, did my exercises, and took class on Zoom. Some of my friends here today will relate to this experience. I am lucky enough to have my teachers from Hyde Park School of Dance, Jane and Anna Sawyer, here today. I think what Jane has to say about dance is really beautiful and powerful. Herself once a student at the school, Jane says, "Hyde Park School of Dance helped me figure out

what type of person I wanted to be. Community and artistry are undeniably connected. Dance taught me to be kind to myself, to hold myself accountable, and to show up prepared for myself and my fellow dancers.” Jane continues, “It taught me to be gracious and to be aware of the space I take up in this world.” In many ways, I feel the same way about Judaism. It speaks to me as an individual, but it also negotiates my relationship with a group. It helps me to think about the type of person I want to be.

This summer I was lucky enough to discuss the parasha in person with all my grandparents, who sadly cannot not be here today. My grandparents in Israel observed that Moshe addresses the Israelities, first in the singular (*re’eh*) and then in the plural (*lifnaychem*). I wondered, to whom was Moshe speaking – each Israelite as an individual or the community as a whole? Perhaps it is both. In becoming a bat mitzvah, I prepare for myself and I also prepare to join a group. I didn’t read the Torah today alone – I was surrounded by the support of an amazing group of women who love and uplift me.

“Look! I set before you a blessing and a curse.” You could say that sometimes responsibilities seem like a burden. But actually, responsibilities are a reminder that we are not alone.

When I was in Paris this summer, visiting my cousins, we came across a memorial on the side of a building that had once been a school. It commemorated 11,000 Jewish children deported from France and murdered by the nazis. Some of the victims were as young as two and three and never had

the chance of going to school. Looking at this plaque, I was acutely aware of being Jewish and of the responsibility I have to carry the memory and lessons of these very dark moments in history. That lesson was reinforced three weeks later when I visited Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem. My Judaism is not defined by this grief. My Judaism is rooted in positivity and love, but as a Jew, I have a responsibility to be alert to injustice and hatred, wherever it exists. This is an important part of what it means to me to be Jewish in this world.

My bat mitzvah falls on rosh chodesh, when the moon is at its smallest phase. I know that I am still growing into the person that I want to be and I am incredibly grateful for the people who are helping me do this.

And while being thankful shouldn’t mean being blind to pain or suffering, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, “Judaism is a sense of wonder, born in a feeling of gratitude. It is about taking life in both hands and making a blessing over it.” I am thankful to be here, in this moment, and in this place, and to feel the connection between us all.

I hope we will all look (*re’eh*), look and remind ourselves that we are each made in God’s image, we are each one another’s blessings.

Orlie Weitzman is an 8th grader at Lab School as well as a student at the Hyde Park School of Dance. She enjoys choreography, reading, writing articles, and spending time with friends. She is inspired by Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and by her grandparents in Scotland and Israel. Orlie's family have been members of CRZ since 2013.

"Jewish Writers"

by *Rebel Without a Clue/Jeff Ruby*



Whenever I hear the words “Jewish writer,” my reaction is swift and complicated. First, the familiar, warm rush of pride: Yes, we are indeed a literary people! A

proud tribe of scholars and thinkers! We see this crazy world through clear eyes and we filter it through a skeptical outsider’s voice, the kind of perspective that only arises when you have thousands of years of white-hot historical angst on your shoulders. Of course Jews are writers. How else are we supposed to come to terms with our strange and frustrating place in this world?

And then I always feel vaguely icky.

“I am often described as a Jewish writer,” said Saul Bellow, Chicago’s ultimate Jewish Writer. “In much the same way, one might be called a Samoan astronomer or an Eskimo cellist or a Zulu Gainsborough expert.” It’s a funny quote, but it gets at the heart of the issue: Why is the qualifier necessary? If a giant like Bellow is not simply a Writer with a capital W, who on earth could be?

Granted, Bellow often wrote about Jewish characters and concerned himself with Jewish “themes.” But a part of me wonders if the act of calling someone a “Jewish writer” is simply a crude method of othering us while conveniently warning off people who *couldn’t possibly* understand the thoughts and culture of a faith not their

own? (As if gentiles can’t identify with the endless complexities and confusion of the American dream.) But, as my wife says: “When you call someone a Jewish writer, the subtext is always, It’s a book for you, me, and your mother.”

Whatever the reason, Bellow was not alone in balking at being stamped with the “Jewish writer” taxonomy. It seems every member of our tribe who ever slaved away at a rusty Smith Corona or tapped out a screenplay on their MacBook Air has rolled their eyes at being called a “Jewish writer.” Roth. Krauss. Trilling. Chabon. Heck, even Judy Blume. Part of this boiled down to simple capitalism, a desire to reach the widest possible audience: “That’s great if Jews read my stuff, but what about the other 99.8 percent of the world?” Others worried that the tag would lead to some kind of self-induced exile, resulting in navel-gazey prose that failed to accurately reflect the feelings of a larger population. Therefore: A writer, first and foremost. Who just happens to be Jewish.

But then there is the emotional baggage that Jewish writers have been forced to lug around for generations—baggage that always threatens to spill over in the writing. An alarming amount of our literature over the years seemed to follow a predictable recipe: a cup of neurotic, woe-is-me humor; a few tablespoons of poignant shtetl fatalism and folklore; a pinch of olde-tyme Yiddish wisdom and whimsy. Stir in multi-generational Holocaust trauma, chill

overnight, serve cold. You could hardly blame a Jewish writer for not wanting to be lumped in with these hoary, matzo-ball stereotypes.

But now? Weird times we're in. On one hand, Jews are so integrated into American society that our culture has become familiar to a wide swath of our fellow Americans, for better or worse. Often, it's a punchline. "Yiddish, a language that the majority of Jews once spoke, has been reduced (for most Jews) to a smattering of funny-sounding catchphrases and penis jokes," wrote David Sax in a 2009 *Vanity Fair* article. Yet at the same time this widespread assimilation is happening, we are being *othered* in all the old familiar ways, such as white Christian men marching and hollering that they refuse to be replaced by us. (As if that were even an option on the table.) It all adds up to an uncanny liminal space for Jews to be in.

Nathan Englander, a former Orthodox Jew now living in Toronto, is one of those writers who always seems to be labeled as "unapologetically Jewish." As if he is some kind of maverick for not tiptoeing around his heritage in mortal fear of upsetting sensitive and fickle gentile readers. ("He writes about kibbutzniks and Yeshiva! And he doesn't seem the slightest bit sorry for it!") He addressed this issue a few years back in his usual sarcastic way. "I'm telling you, with white supremacists resurgent and wielding power, this pulled-pork-loving, drive-on-Saturdays secular Jew has never been happier to be called a Jewish-American Novelist," he wrote in the *New York Times*. "One yarmulke isn't even good enough for me, these days. I'm writing this with a half-dozen stacked, like pancakes, on top of my head."

I assumed that everyone else found the "Jewish writer" label to be as loaded as I do. This was a naïve assumption. When I asked my ever-woke seventeen-year-old daughter what she thinks of when she hears the words "Jewish writer," I expected some kind of diatribe about how it perpetuates a cycle of unintentional racism or upholds some status quo of which I am unwittingly a part. But she took a different tack.

"It makes me feel represented," she said. "No. Validated." But does it feel vaguely icky, like Jews were being culturally ghettoized or something of the sort? "Oh, come on," she said, rolling her eyes as only a teenager can. "So many writers are Jewish, it doesn't feel ostracizing to me." All she felt was the pride—*This book is awesome! Oh, look, the writer is Jewish!*—and the rest was just me making my usual big deal out of nothing. In other words: Lighten up, Dad.

She's got a point. Maybe I should take a cue from Nathan Englander, who nowadays shrugs his shoulders at the whole thing and can't help but write about Jews. "I tried to keep them out," he said "And they climbed through the window. What can I tell you? I write about my people. If they be Jews, groovy."

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