

THE TAB

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COMMUNITY

The Temple of Zoom

Even though in-person services have resumed, synagogues across the country say remote options are here to stay

BY PAULA JACOBS

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Temple Micah held Shabbat and holiday services in its sanctuary, while simultaneously livestreaming for remote attendees. But in March 2020, when the world entered COVID lockdown, the 670-unit Reform synagogue in Washington, D.C.—like non-Orthodox synagogues across America—quickly moved congregational life to Zoom to keep congregants engaged and maintain community.

Since reopening its doors after the pandemic, Temple Micah has upgraded its technology: A sophisticated system incorporates livestream and Zoom for Shabbat and holiday services, enabling worshippers to recite an aliyah or lead the congregation in prayer over Zoom. Adult education, lunch and learn, guest lectures, as well as committee meetings—including the annual congregational meeting—are hybrid, both in-person and over Zoom. “Adult education has increased since COVID. Zoom offers possibilities for reaching people because they live at a distance, do not wish to drive, or are simply more comfortable at home,” said Rabbi Daniel Zemel, who envisions using Zoom for many years to come, including in areas not yet imagined. “Zoom is here to stay and I think it is very important.”

Nor is Temple Micah alone. The Synagogue Studies Institute reports that 85% of respondents to its 2023 FACT/EPIC survey offer online worship, versus 24% before the pandemic. Meanwhile, 70% of respondents—representing Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist congregations across the U.S.—expect to still offer an online/virtual worship option in five years; more than 59% use Zoom for study sessions and approximately 60% for administrative meetings.

Additionally, 29% of the FACT/EPIC survey respondents reported a 25% increase in worship attendance, which the Synagogue Studies Institute attributes to the online virtual option. “I hear over and over again from rabbis: When do we get back to normal?” explained Rabbi Aaron Spiegel, president of the Synagogue Studies Institute. “My answer is: This is normal. We have been losing members and seats in pews for 20 years, and all of a sudden we are gaining participation and engagement. If we don’t embrace this, it is counterintuitive. We have to be responsive rather than dictate that this is the right way to do it.”

Indeed, even though the pandemic is officially over, synagogues continue to use the online platform for worship, classes, programs, and meetings even though rabbis would prefer in-person gatherings. Today, when not faced with a life-threatening pandemic, synagogues

have also become more strategic about implementing technology where it adds real value: Life cycle events such as b'nai mitzvah are now held in person (with online technology such as livestream also available) as are youth activities, including religious school education. According to the Synagogue Studies' findings, 50% of religious education is in person as well as 45.5% of youth activities.

At Temple Sinai in Summit, New Jersey, in-person participation is a priority—although services are also livestreamed, with Zoom used selectively for some committee meetings and adult education classes. “The in-person experience is more communal and nurtures community in terms of relationship building,” said Rabbi Erin Glazer of the 400-family Reform congregation which had shifted to Zoom during the pandemic. “Being part of a community requires participation and presence.”

Just because something is technologically possible, it may not meet the synagogue's goals and priorities, cautions Glazer: “Think about the goal of each experience and program differently so you make the right choice for each gathering.”

By aligning Zoom with their goals, synagogues can reap benefits. “It's all about making Judaism and Jewish practice meaningful, and removing barriers to participation,” said Rabbi Susan Elkodsi of the Malverne Jewish Center, a small, pluralistic congregation in Malverne, New York, which has experienced greater participation in Shabbat services and classes since implementing Zoom in 2019 to accommodate its elderly congregation. At Or Hadash, a Reconstructionist congregation in Fort Washington, Pennsylvania, Zoom has created a sacred space for meaningful discussions in its spiritual growth *havurah*, Torah study class, and book club, explains Rabbi Alanna Sklover. And Zoom has enabled a Jewish Renewal congregation—MOSH: Minyan Oneg Shabbat—to expand its reach across North America from a small gathering of local residents who met pre-pandemic twice a month in a rented D.C. church to a “Zoomagogue” that meets online three times a week for prayer, study,

and meditation. “We are a welcoming community of spiritual God-wrestlers who have found a spiritual home online that is filled with joy and contemplation that is ignited by music and Torah,” said Rabbi Mark Novak, founder and spiritual leader.

In any case, it's often a balancing act to encourage in-person gatherings and also satisfy those desiring online connection. “Being in-person is our top priority, but allowing access to community online is an important value,” explained Rabbi Andrew Paley of Temple Shalom, a 600-unit Reform synagogue in Dallas where most activities are now in-person: Worship services—which had switched from livestream to Zoom at the outset of COVID—are back in the sanctuary and also livestreamed; the rabbi's weekly Torah study class is hybrid (20-30 in-person attendees and 15-20 on Zoom). “Forcing people into a singular modality of experience and community is probably not the most conducive for helping the variety of people out there. You want to extend as many lifelines to people as you can.”

Rabbi Josh Breindel of Congregation Beth El of the Sudbury Valley agrees. “A significant portion of our congregation values the opportunity to connect online. Everyone agrees that coming in person is a fuller experience but we live in an imperfect world.”

At the 225-unit Reform synagogue in Sudbury, Massachusetts, 99% of worship and study is hybrid. Shabbat and holiday services are in person, on Zoom, and livestreamed. Former members who have moved out of town have been able to reconnect and come to study. New congregants from across the U.S. have also joined as virtual members. The majority of congregants now attend worship services in person with a choral microphone positioned so that those online can hear the harmonies from the congregation; meanwhile online attendance has remained stable.

Since March 2020, the synagogue's Thursday morning “Hasidic Tales” study group has met exclusively on Zoom. Members hail from across the U.S. to study and discuss Martin Buber's classic work. “It surprised me that

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you can feel so close to people just in little boxes and still have a discussion and learn things,” explained congregant Susan Phillips, who finds online study more convenient for her schedule, especially since she lives approximately 12 miles from the synagogue.

Zoom has also enabled Congregation Beth El to become more inclusive and expand programming: Congregants with mobility or health issues can participate fully, and programs now feature speakers and teachers from across geographical zones. “This allows us all to benefit from having as many voices as possible in our studies, programs, and services,” explained Breindel. “I miss having the regular large number of people to hug and eat together but I feel as this technology continues to develop, we will offer our members new ways to live Jewish lives.”

Nearly a decade ago, Congregation Shaarey Zedek, a 1,000-unit Conservative synagogue in Southfield, Michigan, began livestreaming services so snowbirds and others physically unable to attend could stay connected. When the pandemic struck, the suburban Detroit synagogue immediately moved from livestream to Zoom.

Post-pandemic, though, its goal is to rebuild community by prioritizing in-person gatherings. Most activities are back in person including: Shabbat and holiday services (with livestream), adult education, and lifecycle events. “Judaism at its core is relational, based on a relationship with our fellow Jews and those in need,” emphasized Rabbi Aaron Starr whose younger son celebrated his bar mitzvah this past spring in the sanctuary, unlike in May 2020 when his older brother celebrated a Zoom bar mitzvah with only immediate family present.

“We often make decisions based on convenience. I hope that we can elevate those decisions to be mission-driven now,” emphasized Starr. “When we use technology, let’s keep the mission of individual technology and synagogues in focus to find meaning in serving God together, and be supported and sustained by our relationships with each other.”

Shaarey Zedek minyanim are either

“We use Zoom because it creates community.”

hybrid or on Zoom, depending on the day of the week. “If I had to go to synagogue, I couldn’t have kept it up ... To me it was very important to participate from a religious, emotional, and healing standpoint,” said congregant Tammy Gorosh, who attended daily minyan twice a day from home to recite Kaddish for her brother and mother who died within a few months of each other.

In any case, Zoom minyanim are likely to stay. “We want to remove any and all obstacles for people in prayer, especially if they are saying Kaddish,” said Starr. “People appreciate the convenience of online. Since offering Zoom for weekday minyan, we have always had a minyan.”

Beth El Synagogue in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, implemented livestream for worship services approximately eight years ago. But in March 2020, the 1,000-family Conservative synagogue switched to Zoom. “We had a sense that it was what we needed to do. We did everything virtually. We also intentionally said that we would try to get people to come back in person,” said Rabbi Alexander Davis.

In-person worship Shabbat services have now resumed, with both Zoom and livestream available. “We use Zoom because it creates community.

When people can see each other and join in a virtual Kiddush after Shabbat services, they connect and deepen their relationships,” explained Davis. Meanwhile, livestream provides a Shabbat experience for those desiring privacy such as residents of care facilities. For logistical reasons, High Holidays will be livestreamed.

Weekday morning minyan is hybrid, while evening minyan is exclusively on Zoom. Importantly, Zoom has made daily minyan more accessible, upping regular attendance and regularly ensuring a prayer quorum, while enabling geographically dispersed families to recite Kaddish together; for instance, Beth El congregant Rivel Greenberg recited Kaddish online for her husband, Phil, twice a day for 11 months—often joined by her children and grandchildren scattered across the U.S.: “Having my kids’ faces on the screen meant a lot. This afforded me family and for that I am grateful.”

During minyan, Davis asks those reciting Kaddish to share a memory of their loved one. “There are some ways in which the technology creates an intimate space that was surprising to me,” he said. “The screen invites them to share more in person. Everyone is looking at the one screen and everyone is present for that one story. It creates an intimacy that I hadn’t quite experienced in person.”

Looking forward, Davis expects to use Zoom selectively for study groups, meetings, programs, and services until a newer technology comes along. The goal, though, is to make judicious use of technology to serve its purpose of building and strengthening community. “If we don’t have real in-person experiences of sustaining community, community won’t be sustainable.”

As for the future, Spiegel summed it up: “I think that what this says is that people now have a choice ... Find what works for them and connect. If we are not attuned to what our congregants want, we will lose them ... The essence of Judaism—the communal part—is at risk.” ■

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Schools Should Not Be Factories

And Mayor Eric Adams is following the Lubavitcher Rebbe's model in making that distinction clear

BY TAMARA MANN TWEEL

This September, 61 years after the Supreme Court banned school prayer, New York City public school students will once again open each school day with an ancient invocation. For two to five minutes a day, children across the city will practice, with trained educators, the art of breathing. New York City Mayor Eric Adams announced the initiative at P.S. 5 in Bedford-Stuyvesant Brooklyn, where three elementary school students led elected officials, journalists, and their principal in six deep breaths of the ocean-sound variety. First, the students explained, you breathe in through your nose; then, you breathe out through your mouth to create a prolonged whisper.

While much of the press has maligned Adams for introducing this respiratory ritual into the education system, the mayor is revisiting an essential question: How should students start a day of school?

This is especially urgent as America's schools have become increasingly charged spaces. Schools close after mass shootings, after egregious acts of cyberbullying, after bad water or air reports. Sometimes they close after suicides. How should students begin a day of learning in the midst of so much fear and uncertainty?

For most of American history, whether young children were educated in their home or, from the mid-1800s, in the new institution of common schools, students began their day in prayer. Words from the Lord's Prayer or biblical passages from the ubiquitous McGuffey Reader

would be recited in unison. Parents sent their children to school to learn reading, penmanship, and arithmetic but also for moral and civic instruction. Morning prayer introduced the purpose of the education to follow: to elevate and form the character of each student. Not surprisingly, prayer was also used as a weapon, deployed for decades to compel Catholic students to utter the Protestant version of the Lord's Prayer and read the King James Bible rather than their own Douay-Rheims Bible.

The purpose of public education evolved in the 20th century, particularly in cities where immigrants of multiple denominations and faiths came together. For many, the school became a site for economic advancement, a place where minds were sorted. As consensus around the moral goal of education diminished, the value of education as the engine of meritocratic advancement grew in importance.

In the 20th century, Jewish students, parents, and teachers joined Catholics in voicing deep discomfort in the way Protestant Christian practice, particularly recitations of the King James Bible, launched the school day. For a brief time, Jewish communities offered a vision of a public school filled with multiple forms of religious practice enacted through "designated released time." Eventually the community replaced that vision with a belief that full equality for American Jews hinged on a public school emptied of religious practice altogether.

The prayer that would finally end school prayer contained 22 words: "Almighty God, we acknowledge our

dependence on Thee, and beg Thy blessings upon us, our teachers, and our country." A priest, a rabbi, and a minister co-authored the prayer on behalf of a New York educational bureaucracy called the Board of Regents, best known today for administering standardized tests. The religious trio sought to create a nondenominational prayer—one that evoked a codified American civic tradition grounded in monotheism but without endorsing a particular religious denomination.

In December 1951, the New York Board of Regents announced the optional prayer, confident in its ability to foster nondenominational religious sentiment among students from different faiths. It did not anticipate the nation-splitting controversy that followed.

On July 8, 1958, the Herrick school board agreed that the Regents Prayer would be recited at the opening of the school day. While students diluted the efficacy of what the *New York Mirror* called "the quickie prayer" with irreverent laughter, mumbling, or just opting out, parents took a more definitive route. Chief among them was Lawrence Roth. Roth was born Jewish and moved to Long Island during a wave of recent Jewish migration. As a 10-year-old boy, Roth had lived through the antisemitic murder of his brother, who was chased by young men screaming "Get the Jew!" and thrown out of a moving car. According to the historian Bruce J. Dierenfield, this experience distanced Roth from his Jewish faith while inspiring a commitment to political action. When he heard about the new prayer, he brought a lawsuit against the district and, based on advice from his lawyers, recruited neighbors as co-plaintiffs. Steve Engel, whose last name would soon become synonymous with the end of school prayer, happened to live next door.

This instigated *Engel v. Vitale*, one



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of most divisive Supreme Court cases in American history. For the plaintiffs, this was a case to preserve the liberties of their children and protect them from state-sanctioned religious coercion. They sought to protect students of all faiths—and non-faiths—from dangerous interference from the state. As the case made its way through the courts, the organized Jewish community, with only rare exceptions, came out loudly in support of the plaintiffs. Organizations like the American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, and the Synagogue Council of America argued that prayer should remain in the domain of the home and the house of worship, and kept out of public spaces.

The Catholic community split with the Jewish community over this case, overwhelmingly supporting the inclusion of the Regents Prayer. Despite decades of enforced denominational practice at the hands of public schools, many in the Catholic community argued that in the 1960s the real threat to religion and America was not denominationalism but rather secularism and Godlessness. On June 25, 1962, the U.S. Supreme Court sided with the plaintiffs and declared that prayer in public schools violated the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. As one influential Texas Republican remarked, the court “kicked God out of the public schools.”

One exception to Jewish organizations' general support of the court's decision came from Chabad headquarters in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, where the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, began speaking out in support of the New York Regents prayer. The Rebbe had escaped Europe for America in 1941 and assumed leadership of the Lubavitch movement in 1950. From the start, the Rebbe created an ambitious policy agenda for what the authors of the book *Social Vision* describe as an “expansive concept of education” for all Jews and residents of the country he made his home.

The Rebbe had a vision for what education must do for America's children.

“An educational system must have a soul. Children are not computers to be fed a mass of informational data, without regard for their human needs for higher goals and ideals in life.”

He wrote, “An educational system must have a soul. Children are not computers to be fed a mass of informational data, without regard for their human needs for higher goals and ideals in life.” In 1962 and 1964, following the court's decision, the Rebbe penned two letters in support of the nondenominational Regents Prayer. He argued that prayer was essential, “to impress upon the minds of our growing-up generation that the world in which they live is not a jungle, where brute force, cunning and unbridled passion rule supreme, but that it has a Master Who is not an abstraction, but a personal G-d; that this Supreme Being takes a ‘personal interest’ in the affairs of each and every individual ...”

The eradication of nondenominational prayer without a thoughtful ritual substitution also had costs. The Rebbe argued in those letters that a loss of a higher purpose of education would lead to increased violence, as “disillusionment, insecurity and confusion” destabilized young people's belief in themselves and their future. Elimination could also lead to a political environment where powerful groups would try to insert denominational practice back into the school day.

When prayer left the classroom, what took its place? For many students

across the country over the last 60 years, the day has begun with the school bell, a clang more redolent of the factory floor than its origins in the church bell. The day proceeds with constant movement, academic sorting, and competition. Some students win and other students lose. There is little opportunity to do something that reminds each student that they are valued for contributing to a greater whole.

In the 1980s, the Rebbe moved beyond school prayer while still actively investing in the moral purpose of education, advocating for a new way to start the school day: with a moment of silence. A daily act of quiet reflection, he explained, could even be preferable to nondenominational prayer—a silent opportunity for students to connect to themselves, their parents, and the goals of education.

Prayer, silence, and breath all transcend a singular instrumental purpose. These techniques can calm the body, elevate the mind, quiet anxiety, and inspire gratitude. They can be done in private, anchoring the self, but they can also be done together in public, forging community. For the last 60 years, the legal story of prayer in schools has overdetermined a conversation that centers on what is or is not allowed in school. A different conversation must be had today: What is the highest purpose of education and what must we do as a society to orient each school day to reach that highest purpose?

It is easy to dismiss the inclusion of breathing in New York City public schools. It can seem like a cheap Band-Aid for life-threatening challenges that our society will simply not confront or pay for. But when you educate you also create a new society. Breathing together in a room can make all students feel that they are present for an education that will help them flourish as human beings in a community. In a society so isolating and splintering as ours, we might all benefit from the experience of one free, oceanlike breath in unison. ■

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Qatar's World Cup FIFA Bribe Documents Exposed

A Tablet investigative exclusive

BY ARMIN ROSEN

The moral and legal compromises FIFA and the Qatari government made to hold the 2022 World Cup in the Doha metropolitan area range from tolerating the host country's ban on homosexuality to deadly abuses of migrant laborers at stadium construction sites. According to documents submitted to the record of a lawsuit in federal court late this afternoon, the road to the first Middle Eastern World Cup also began with a series of straightforward bribes.

Qatar National Bank (QNB) documents, included in a filing made by a Philadelphia-based policy organization fighting a subpoena from a former Qatari-hired American lobbyist, reveal the secret cost of Qatar's bid to put on the biggest sporting event on Earth. The documents record over 210 million pounds in payments, then worth over \$330 million, to members of the FIFA committee who voted on which country would host the 2018 and 2022 tournaments in late 2010. They list specific names, bank account numbers, and amounts of money received.

The record of payments comes in the form of a balance sheet for an account at QNB belonging to the Qatar Diplomatic Mission in London. Between February of 2009 and December of 2010, the account paid over 350 million pounds (\$553 million) to some 22 individuals, with the majority of the money going to 14 members of the FIFA executive committee, the body which chooses the

host countries for the organization's flagship event. Some of the payments went to close family members, although a majority of them were direct to committee members.

The payments were largely made in two phases, with money coming both before and after the vote that granted Qatar the tournament on Dec. 2, 2010. The amounts were often channeled into bank accounts in "offshore" financial havens like Monaco and Jersey, which tend to attract less scrutiny compared to those in more more closely regulated jurisdictions.

According to the filing, a now-former employee of the Qatari government who was then working for the Qatar National Bank's London office requested the account's balance sheet. The QNB report was obtained by a person, whose name is redacted, "who was involved in conducting some of the transactions at the direction of superiors" and who was later "terminated after reporting a sexual assault by a senior bank official," the filing states.

The account statements were reviewed by Fiona Marsh, an expert in forensic document analysis with experience working as a civil servant for the London Metropolitan Police Department. In a December 2017 report, which has also been entered into the federal court record, Marsh wrote she was "unable to find any evidence that the questioned documents are other than genuine." While the date of the bank ledger's creation is redacted in the court filing, Marsh wrote in her report

that the eight-page bank record, which included the official stamp of Qatar National Bank, was dated Oct. 17, 2017.

"I have looked at certain documents and I have written a report," Marsh confirmed to Tablet, but added that she "can't give any more detail because my obligation is to my client," whom she declined to name. An unrelated group of London-based private investigators conducted a separate inquiry into the documents, using their own sources in the Middle East. This effort also determined the documents were authentic, and it was able to confirm that the QNB account in fact existed. The two different and nonoverlapping London-based efforts to authenticate the documents suggest that the initial source attempted to give them to more than one potential intermediary in the hope they would eventually see daylight.

There was just enough leakage in the chain of custody for the QNB records, as well as Marsh's forensic analysis of their veracity, to end up in the possession of the Philadelphia-based Middle East Forum (MEF), which publishes frequently about Doha's support for the region's Islamist movements. Today's filing shows that MEF went to some length to authenticate the documents. The filing describes how the organization used private investigators to confirm the existence of bank account numbers belonging to two family members and a suspected shell company of Ahmed Al-Sabah, a future FIFA executive committee member who was then Kuwait's sports minister. All three received payments from the QNB account.

According to the QNB record, over 210 million pounds, then worth \$330 million, passed between the bank account and 14 different members of the 22-member FIFA executive committee. Qatar's deep reserves of natural gas and small number of actual citizens have made it one of the richest countries on Earth per capita. But nearly a third of a billion dollars is a lot of money for anyone. The expenditures suggest how high of a priority it was for the Qatari government to win the right to host the World Cup, a soft-power victory on a scale that none of the tiny Gulf emirate's

larger and more powerful neighbors has ever been able to reach.

The price of some FIFA committee votes was apparently higher than others. For instance, Nicolas Leoz, the now-deceased former head of South America's soccer federation, got 5.4 million pounds (\$8.5 million). But the highest payments went to Vitaly Mutko, Russia's minister for sport between 2008 and 2016, chairman of the successful Russian bid for the 2018 World Cup, and deputy prime minister from 2016 to 2020. He got 46 million pounds (\$72.6 million) on Feb. 19, 2009, followed by another 21.5 million pounds (\$34 million) on Dec. 20, 2010.

Per the documents, Qatar landed the tournament through paying a senior henchman of one of the world's more oppressive and corrupt regimes. Mutko was Russia's top sports official during a time in which the country's Olympic athletes were doping on a systemic scale, leading to the country's ban from the games. Grigory Rodchenkov, the doctor responsible for exposing the extent of Russia's state-orchestrated doping operation, said that Mutko ordered him to "tamper with over 100 steroid-laced urine samples" during the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, and asked him to "conceal similar cheating in the years before and after the 2014 Games," according to *The New York Times*. Rodchenkov is the subject of the Oscar-winning 2017 documentary *Icarus*, and is now living in hiding in the United States. Amid official Russian denials, a 2015 report from the World Anti-Doping Agency stated that Mutko likely had personal knowledge of the doping scheme, and found that his ministry had close ties to the country's highly corrupt official drug-testing organization.

In 2017, the International Olympic Committee issued Mutko a lifetime ban, which barred him from attending the 2018 Winter Games in South Korea (in 2019, the International Court of Arbitration for Sport overturned the IOC ban, on the basis that the organization did not have the ability to bar anyone who wasn't an official member of any national Olympic committee or team). Today, Mutko is one of Russia's leading housing officials, CEO of a joint stock

company that, per the Kremlin's website, is "the operator for all subsidized mortgage programs" in the country. He is one of the highest-ranking current or former Putin regime officials who has avoided being placed under Western sanctions.

How apparent proof of Qatar's FIFA payoffs wound up in the federal court record is a story in itself. In early 2022, MEF received a subpoena from Gregory Howard, a former Foreign Agents Registration Act-disclosed lobbyist for Qatar who is being sued by California businessman Elliot Broidy. Broidy is a former Republican Party deputy national fundraising chair and a longtime pro-Israel political spender. In 2020, Broidy pleaded guilty to conspiring to lobby for interests in Malaysia and China without making the required federal disclosures, though President Donald Trump later pardoned him. Broidy also reportedly worked closely with George Nader, an alleged unregistered lobbyist for the United Arab Emirates who sought to influence members of Trump's inner circle. Much of the evidence connecting Broidy to the UAE, a regional rival of Qatar, came from stolen emails. In his lawsuit, Broidy claims the lobbyists Joey Allaham, Nick Muzin, and Greg Howard helped Qatari-hired hackers target and disseminate his private messages in retaliation for his political activism, which often focused on Qatar's support for Islamist groups, including Hamas.

Last week, Broidy dropped his case against Allaham. The former kosher restaurateur, who Qatar initially hired as part of an effort to improve the Gulf emirate's image among American Jews, then revealed new information about his dealings with Doha and the country's strategy in fighting Broidy's lawsuit. As Tablet reported last week, Allaham now claims that a London-based lawyer instructed him to withhold information in the lawsuit's discovery process that might be embarrassing to Qatar. Allaham also produced a notarized 2019 contract with Qatar's Washington Embassy in which he was to be paid \$1.15 million in exchange for signing an affidavit attesting to the embassy's version of its relationship with him.

The Broidy defendants subpoenaed nearly two dozen people and organizations over the course of 2022, including Allen Roth, the political adviser to the Jewish philanthropist and Republican donor Ronald Lauder, and Aaron Keyak, the U.S. State Department's deputy antisemitism envoy and head of Jewish outreach for Joe Biden's successful 2020 presidential campaign.

A number of subpoena targets alleged that Qatar and its American lawyers are using the federal court system to harass their American critics. "These law firms are engaged in a really despicable harassment, fishing, and lawfare campaign against people who, like me, are accused of no wrongdoing," the writer David Reaboi, who received a subpoena, told Tablet last year. Broidy's lawyers now openly allege that Qatar is financing the defense of the case. "It appears that—at the behest of this enormously wealthy foreign country which was paying the fees of all of those parties' attorneys—the lawyers for defendants and nonparties and Qatar itself went to extraordinary lengths to help Qatar cover up ... egregious misconduct," the plaintiff alleged in an Aug. 25

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reply memorandum filed after Broidy dropped his case against Allaham.

MEF has been fighting its subpoena since the spring of 2022. Earlier this evening, the group filed a motion to quash the subpoena, which its lawyers characterize as a form of politically motivated harassment. The filing included information that MEF possessed that is relevant to broader issues of Qatari foreign policy that it already turned over to Howard's lawyers, including the QNB account records. Today's filing reproduces emails between MEF and Howard's lawyers establishing that the group gave the defense these materials in response to their subpoena in the spring of 2022. The World Cup-related documents are in today's latest filing as a show of MEF's earlier cooperation with what they consider to be an overly broad subpoena. The group's lawyers now allege the filing was part of a Qatari attempt to abuse the federal court system in order to probe the emirate's American political opponents.

The alleged state-ordered hacking of Broidy's email account, an aggressive legal strategy, and whatever individual grievances might have led someone in Qatar's London employ to leak sensitive information about the biggest public messaging breakthrough in the country's history, culminated in Doha's alleged World Cup bribes entering the record in a federal lawsuit.

"We have no comment at this time," a spokesperson from MEF told Tablet. "We'll let the documents speak for themselves." Tablet has reached out to FIFA, QNB, and Qatar's London and Washington embassies for a response to the filing.

Faced with the evidence contained in the documents, the Qataris can counter that international soccer gave the Putin regime a whole lot more than just the 67 million pounds (\$105.8 million) Doha apparently handed Vitaly Mutko. In 2010, Moscow was awarded the right to host the 2018 World Cup, the same day Qatar 2022 was announced. In a sense, the Qataris were playing down to the low moral standards of international soccer.

In 2015, the U.S. government indicted

"The American press, which has focused withering criticism on other Middle Eastern states, has mostly been charmed by Qatar's well-funded PR offensive."

nine FIFA officials for alleged racketeering and announced that Charles Blazer, a member of the FIFA executive committee who had voted to award Qatar and Russia the World Cup, had pleaded guilty to wire fraud and money laundering. During his sentencing hearing, Blazer acknowledged he had received bribes in connection with Morocco's and South Africa's bids for the 1998 and 2010 World Cups, respectively. According to the QNB account ledger, Blazer received 13.9 million pounds (\$21.9 million) from the QNB account. He died in 2017, at the age of 72.

Treating World Cup hosting rights as a diplomatic objective that a regime could buy just like any other asset was a successful approach to being awarded the tournament in the late 2000s. In retrospect, the \$330 million price was probably a bargain. The World Cup was a public messaging triumph for Doha. Soccer fans and the global media largely ignored Qatar World Cup Chairman Hassan al-Thawadi's remarkable admission in the runup to the tournament that between 400 and 500 workers had died working on World Cup-related projects. The world paid shockingly little interest to a pre-tournament report in Swiss media that Qatar spent \$387 million spying on international soccer officials, and that Qatari-linked hackers were in

possession of emails stolen from former U.S. Soccer Federation head Sunil Gulati which included his personal medical records. Qatar has denied allegations that it acted improperly in gaining the right to host the World Cup.

The American press, which has focused withering criticism on other Middle Eastern states, was largely charmed by Qatar's well-funded PR offensive centered around the World Cup. On Dec. 5, 2022, *The Washington Post's* Today's WorldView newsletter published a credulous tourism blurb for the Gulf monarchy, gushing that "Doha may be an appealing destination to visitors from the Middle East, Asia and Africa." Democratic Sen. Chris Murphy of Connecticut, who is often outspoken about the purported misdeeds of Israel and Saudi Arabia, praised Qatar as "our best partner in the region."

Money has been no object for Doha in advancing a self-contradicting strategy of being a pro-Islamist monarchy that also appears to be a forward-thinking and progressive state, embodying the same values as the Western democracies Doha seeks to influence. Qatar has enough money to be able to buy popularity, whether it's through showering a half-billion dollars on Al Gore and his partners in order to buy their failing cable channel, pledging \$14.8 million to the Brookings Institution, flying leaders of the American Jewish community to Doha, or hosting the single biggest sporting event in the world. Doha apparently gambled that the fiscal and reputational costs of bribing its way to the World Cup would be negligible in the long run—a principle that has served the monarchy well in its larger campaign for influence.

Late last year, Belgium charged four individuals as part of an alleged Qatari scheme to bribe a vice president of the European Parliament, who had publicly met Qatar's labor minister and praised the country's progress on workers' rights shortly before the tournament kicked off. It was yet another blatant instance of Qatar attempting to purchase the world's goodwill. But it's a strategy that hasn't failed yet. ■

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THE REST

→ The summer of **strikes and organized labor actions across Hollywood, hospitals, and auto plants could roll into the fall and winter as the Transportation Workers Union of America, representing 155,000 workers, has launched an attack campaign against the New York Metro Transportation Authority for lowballing the union on wages.** TWU leader John Samuelson said the MTA could not be trusted during contract negotiations, calling the agency “institutionally depraved.” Work stoppage laws means the strike along commuter lines wouldn’t happen until the 2024 election season is in full swing, which could see President Joe Biden backing the unions as he courts the support of labor for his reelection bid.

→ The **U.S. National Guard hosted Taiwanese military troops for training in Michigan last month**, according to a new report from Japan outlet Sankei Shimbun. With several countries sending troops to train in the U.S. state, it wasn’t clear how many of the 7,000 soldiers were from Taiwan, but according to the report, the cohort was larger than previous groups sent to train with Americans. The report added that the training took place under the auspices of the National Guard, which is largely organized by state governments rather than U.S. armed forces so as not to unnecessarily provoke China.

→ Following the debut of its weight-loss drug Wegovy in the United Kingdom on Monday, **Danish drug maker Novo Nordisk saw its market share swell to become the most valuable company in Europe. In fact, its \$428 billion valuation means it’s worth more than the entire Danish economy**, which had the staff of the Scandinavian company throwing a wild office party. Sharing the same active ingredient with Ozempic, Wegovy is selling for about \$300 in the United Kingdom, while Americans are forking over upwards of \$1,300 for a month’s supply. Novo Nordisk and American-based Eli Lilly are expected to maintain a duopoly over the weight-loss drug market for three years or more while other companies race to catch up in a marketplace some expect to be worth \$1 trillion.

→ **A Russian missile strike on Kostyantynivka, a city in eastern Ukraine, killed at least 16 people, becoming one of the deadliest attacks in Ukraine in recent months.** “A regular market. Shops. A pharmacy. People who did nothing wrong,” President Volodymyr Zelenskyy wrote on the platform Telegram about the strike, noting that the number of casualties could rise. The attack came just as Secretary of State Antony Blinken arrived in Kyiv for an unannounced visit, where he’s expected to publicize a new \$1 billion aid package for Ukraine. “We want to make sure that Ukraine has what it needs, not only to succeed in the counteroffensive, but has what it needs for the long term, to make sure that it has a strong deterrent,” Blinken told media in Kyiv.

→ **Saudi Arabia’s announcement on Tuesday that the country would keep oil production low through the end of 2023 sent global stocks into a skid on Wednesday**, increasing traders’ concern that high inflation might not go away anytime soon. Russia also said it would extend its voluntary supply cuts through the end of the year, which together pushed oil prices to their highest level since November of 2022. The announcement from the two largest oil producers in the world after the United States extends what both Saudi Arabia and Russia said was initially a temporary measure while they wait for prices to rebound. As a result, central banks might keep rates high as they try to combat inflation.

THE BIG STORY

The ongoing feud between Elon Musk and the Anti-Defamation League over hate speech moderation on Musk’s Twitter/X platform took a turn this holiday weekend when Musk said he was preparing to file a defamation lawsuit against the ADL for “trying to kill” X by “falsely accusing” him and his platform of antisemitism. The ADL, which has taken on an increasingly partisan role as an enforcer of Democratic Party policy goals under its director, Jonathan Greenblatt has accused Musk of allowing antisemitism and other forms of hate speech to flourish on the platform since Musk took it over in 2022. Critics of the ADL say the group is inflating social media threats while cozying up to partners like Al Sharpton, who has a history of fomenting real-world antisemitism.

Musk, straining credulity, now blames the ADL for his company’s revenue woes, alleging that advertising sales—which comprised 90% of Twitter’s revenue prior to his acquisition of the platform—had fallen 60% because of an ADL’s pressure campaign. “Based on what we’ve heard from advertisers, ADL seems to be responsible for most of our revenue loss,” Musk said.

The Labor Day dustup follows a meeting last Wednesday between Musk’s recently hired CEO Linda Yaccarino, a veteran TV advertising executive, and Greenblatt. News of the meeting led to right-wing Twitter provocateur Eva Vlaardingerbroek to instigate a #BantheADL campaign.

—Sean Cooper

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The South's Jewish Proust

Shelby Foote, failed novelist and closeted member of the Tribe, turned the Civil War into a masterpiece of American literature

BY BLAKE SMITH

Shelby Foote (1916-2005) was one the greatest American writers—one of the greatest *Jewish* American writers. His trilogy *The Civil War: A Narrative*, published between 1958 and 1974, is to history what Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (Foote's favorite and most-read book) is to the novel, masterful in its staggering scope, architectonic sentences, and dazzling reversals of perspective and characterization. Descended, on his father's side, from Mississippi Delta planters, including a Confederate commander at the battle of Shiloh, Foote played in public the blue-blooded raconteur. His appearance in Ken Burns' *The Civil War* documentary in 1990 made him, for millions of viewers, synonymous with a genteel unctuousness imagined as typical of elite Southern whites.

Of his mother's family—Vienna Jews who came to the Delta town of Greenville late in the 19th century—he rarely spoke, although, his father having died when he was 5, it was they who had raised him. Greenville's small, bustling Jewish community, documented in the writing of its other most notable son, David Cohn (*Where I Was Born and Raised, God Shakes Creation, The Mississippi Delta and the World*), its synagogue, which he attended until the age of 11, and the inner life of its members hardly appear in Foote's writing; he cannot be called a “Jewish novelist” in the sense meant for his contemporaries like Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Bernard Malamud.

He lived his Jewishness not as

membership in a faith or a community but as something uncomfortable, half-secret, to be concealed or escaped. This may have been just what enabled him to become our country's greatest student of Proust, whose biographical similarities to himself Foote surely understood and never discussed with interviewers. Foote was never more than a second-rate novelist—whether Southern, Jewish, or anything else—but, after a two-year writer's block put him at the precipice of suicide, he applied himself to history as one of the most masterful stylists in American letters, doing in nonfiction what he could not do in fiction, and letting himself in the process be mistaken for the archetype of the pure-bred Southerner.

Foote did indeed identify with the South, and defend it with less the objectivity of a nonprofessional historian than with a political passion understanding of it as a victim of the American empire whose most compelling exponent—Abraham Lincoln—he unreservedly admired. His vision of history and politics, as the turns of the preceding sentence suggest, was far removed from the categories invoked by those today who would cancel or rehabilitate him. It hinges on a notion of honor—as what the artist seeks to win for himself and what the descendant owes to his forbears—that must have been particularly acute in a man who played the proud scion of Southern gentry to hide the other half of himself.

In a 1970 interview, after he had become, thanks to his leading role in Ken Burns' documentary, not only respected

by fellow authors and read by Civil War buffs, but a nationally famous image of Dixie gentility, Foote discussed, as he often would in later interviews, his father's planter family, and—as he would hardly ever do after in public—mentioned his mother's, who had come “from Vienna ... from the world outside.” He did not say they—or he—were Jews. He went on to describe Greenville, where he grew up, as a cosmopolitan little town, where Chinese, Middle Eastern, and European merchants and craftsmen lent an unusual degree of diversity to Delta life. He noted—as if it had not been a personal concern—that hostility to outsiders was common elsewhere in the region, and that antisemitism was rife in towns just down the road, where Jews were excluded from country clubs, passing over his own experiences of discrimination.

What he learned about being different—and how to disguise it—came to him perhaps from William Alexander Percy, eccentric landowner, semicloseted homosexual poet, and uncle of Foote's closest friend, Walker Percy, who mentored the fatherless Foote during his adolescence. William Alexander Percy introduced him to the emerging canon of literary modernism, to writers like Thomas Mann (his own mother, however, gave a 17-year-old Foote *In Search of Lost Time*). Uncle Percy was one model for how a man with a galling sense of interior difference might nevertheless cultivate himself in public as a model planter and Southern conservative; his 1941 memoirs *Lanterns on the Levee* are what must strike present-day readers as a bizarre compound of apologia for white supremacy (provided it is exercised not by ungentle populist rabble-rousers but by dignified planter aristocrats), veiled defenses of “Greek” love, and swooningly purple descriptions of Southern moonlight, magnolia, and other such set-pieces of stereotypical down-home Arcadia. Foote learned much from William Alexander Percy, but neither he nor Nephew Percy (later a Catholic existentialist novelist under the influence of Allen Tate and Caroline Gordon) would become such a reactionary.

After adolescence, two years at the University of North Carolina (during

which he was barred from the fraternity his friend Percy had joined, when its members somehow learned that he was Jewish), military service blotched by his going AWOL (to fool around with a woman who would, briefly, be the first of his three wives), and a stint in local journalism, Foote became, and rather quickly, a novelist of some skill and reputation. He modeled himself on Faulkner—whose work William Alexander Percy failed to admire, because the author had once showed up at his house to play tennis, incapacitatingly drunk—who, in the 1930s and '40s was himself becoming one of the most powerful writers in our national (and even more so in our Southern) literature.

Of his own early work Foote later said, “I had an excitement about language that flawed” the writing. The first draft of his first novel, *Tournament*, written in 1939, contained ramshackle mad sentences like: “Its dusty brick rainstreaked, its low pillars garbled, itself gutted, despoiled, vacant now for two years, with an air of febrile advocacy, a charivari of grandeur, possessing grain for grain the texture and stuff of the dregs of nothing more than backward yearning hope, recapitulant, somnolent, now tinted by the red rising sun behind it, the panache of dust and desire...” Such horrors were meant to imitate Faulkner, echoing, with turgid excess, the description of a similar house in *Sanctuary* (1931) “a gutted ruin rising gaunt and stark out of a grove.”

By the end of the decade Faulkner would become one of the eternal masters of American English, not least for his unheralded combinations of adjectives, but during Foote’s apprenticeship to literature he too was finding his way. *Light in August* (1932), for example, has its beauties, but they are proximate to disaster, as in: “The house, the study, is dark behind him, and he is waiting for that instant when all light has failed out of the sky and it would be night save for that faint light which daygrained leaf and grass blade reluctant suspire, making still a little light on earth though night itself has come.”

Here Faulkner—who had meant first to be a poet—channels Charles

“The first draft of his first novel, *Tournament*, written in 1939, contained ramshackle mad sentences.”

Swinburne and Gerard Manley Hopkins (like his American contemporary Hart Crane) to gush unmodern bathetic guff in an inverted Latinate style. Faulkner would do much better than this, soon—and at his best wrote what few will ever equal. He was still learning how to shift his bloated neologizing into a register capable of vatic pomposity, but definitively removed from the ridiculous to the cosmic, and also (perhaps from his experience writing scripts for Hollywood) capable of all the other registers of speech besides faux-antique grandiloquence.

Over the course of his apprenticeship in fiction, Foote gradually freed himself from sub-Faulknerian imitation, and moved into a maturer style characterized by graceful, sometimes mannered, even Olympian, detachment which, rather than being the mere embodiment or extension into discourse of the violence it conveyed, could now chillingly contrast it, as in this scene of the story “Child by Fever” from *Jordan County* (1954), which in its masterful cruelty puts its author on the level of Hardy in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*:

By Tuesday the rector was onto crutches, and ten days later, on Christmas Eve, Hector Wingate, hard-faced now in his middle fifties—he had

gotten so he rarely spoke to anyone, and whoever spoke to him risked offense, either given or received—was killed by a Negro tenant following a disagreement over the ’77 crop. Thus at last he achieved his heritage of violence; it had been a bloody death, if not a hero’s. The tenant was caught late that night, treed by dogs in a stretch of timber east of town, and lynched early Christmas morning. That was the one they burned in front of the courthouse.

The deaths befall in passive voice, as if of no importance, and the lynching of any particular Black man appears so difficult to remember amid all the others (revealing, with such faint indirection, generations of organized murder) it must be distinguished with a “that was the one” addressed to the reader who, thus presumed to remember, is made one of the community of whites who have long been dispensing such violence. Playing long sentences in which dash-suspended digressions hang like narrow bridges against short, blunt ones, and lofty sententiousness (“Thus at last he achieved his heritage of violence”) against brutal directness (“That was the one they burned”), Foote showed himself a skilled writer—except that his attempts to give voice to a range of social classes and character types were more or less failures, all speaking alike the emergingly confident and distinct timbre of the Footean narrator.

He was, without knowing it, preparing himself to become a writer of history—a genre in which he would be spared having to invent distinct voices for his characters, who rather speak for themselves through the primary sources. Even as he learned to control his sentences, Foote deftly played with shifts in perspective among multiple narrators,

ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

The Jewish State and its neighbors at tabletmag.com/sections/israel-middle-east

culminating in his novel *Shiloh* (1952). In that final novel before he began the Civil War trilogy, battle passages are long, expansive, but tightly organized, tracking from one side to another, Union to Confederate, back and again, up and down through all levels of experience, from the general's expansive vision to the private's narrow baffled terror.

It spins around so many different perspectives that the reader may wearily grant Foote the prize in kaleidoscopic capacity, while regretting the neglect of human feeling (it is in that sense no surprise that Foote's novels were appreciated less in America than in France—where Faulkner's success in translation had paved their way, and where readers of the New Novel and its anti-narrative techniques and learned to savor fiction organized as a kind of ballet, a kinetic exercise, rather than an exploration of affect and personality in action). Foote's notes and drafts for his novels and stories from the late '40s and early '50s are filled with charts of how interlocking shifts in perspective will outdo the accomplishments of Faulkner and other modern novelists who pioneered them in the decades prior, hardly sketching however a character or considering plot in terms of its psychological motivations rather than such intricate, sterile mechanics.

By the beginning of the 1950s, with the completion of *Shiloh*, Foote had written four novels and a collection of short stories, all of which did moderately well in sales and reviews. In late 1951 he felt ready to tackle what he planned in his diary to be a tremendous, multi-generational novel about a Delta family (gentiles) to eclipse Faulkner's own sagas. In a letter to Walker Percy on Dec. 31, he crowed, "I'm among the greatest American writers of all time ... and at the age of thirty-five." The next New Year, after 12 months of uninterrupted writer's block, he confided to his diary, "Bad situation—the kind that leads to suicide with some people." His novel—*Two Gates to the City*—was going nowhere; another marriage had failed; he was broke.

When a publisher, appreciating the historian's art on display in *Shiloh*, offered Foote a contract for what

was supposed to be a short nonfiction overview of the Civil War, he had little choice but to accept, although it soon became not a quick cash-grab but his 3,000-page, two-decades-long masterpiece, the real work of his life.

Faulkner had been in Foote's way; Proust was the light to his path. He had read *In Search of Lost Time* several times through before beginning the Civil War trilogy, and it was from Proust he learned the abilities essential to such a long, digressive narrative—which turns apparently meandering and spontaneous but moves only with its author's deliberate, far-seeing and much-remembering care—to its long, digressive sentences, and to the art of characterization by which Foote, following Proust, would supply a telling detail at just the right moment to surprisingly revise the reader's understanding. Here he added something new to his acquired mastery in moving among different perspectives, and became, albeit with found rather than invented characters, a master novelist, one who lets personalities shine out in action and be mirrored in the reactions of others. Foote does this even for the smallest characters who appear only briefly to receive a command or charge across a field.

Volume 3 of the trilogy, for example, begins with Grant, haggard, thin, fairly ugly, unphotographed and thus unfamiliar, visually, to the public, upon his arrival in Washington to receive command of the eastern theater:

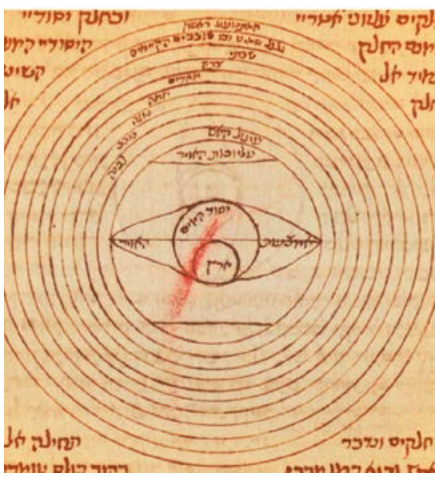
Late afternoon of a raw, gusty day in early spring—March 8, a Tuesday, 1864—the desk clerk at Willard's Hotel, two blocks down Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House, glanced up to find an officer accompanied by a boy of thirteen facing him across the polished oak of the registration counter and inquiring whether he could get a room ... Discerning so much of this as he considered worth his time, together perhaps with the bystander's added observation that the applicant had 'rather the look of a man who did, or once did, take a little too much to drink, the clerk was no more awed by the

stranger's rank than he was attracted by his aspect. This was, after all, the best known hostelry in Washington. There had been by now close to five hundred Union generals, and of these the great majority ... had checked in and out of Willard's ... The desk clerk ... still maintaining the accustomed, condescending air he was about to lose in shock when he read what the weathered applicant had written: 'U.S. Grant & Son—Galena, Illinois'

This extract condenses the opening paragraph, which occupies more than a full page, wherein Grant's taking command, with all its consequences, is introduced first through the snobbery of character so minor as to be otherwise invisible to history. This is Proust at war.

Proustian, too, is Foote's account of the trilogy's most important Jewish character, the Confederate cabinet member Judah P. Benjamin, whom Foote presents as a heroic organizer, a brilliant head for logistics unjustly despised by his colleagues and the Southern public. Introducing Benjamin in volume 1, Foote contrasts his own praise, and Confederate President Jefferson Davis' vivid appreciation of Benjamin's indispensable talents, with others' hostility, and only, after several pages, in the middle of the penultimate paragraph of this section, brings in, through the quoted speech of someone else, the key fact of Benjamin's Jewishness.

History, giving him characters ready-made, let Foote escape his earlier impasses—at least for the two-decade duration of his writing *The Civil War*. When he finished it, he turned back to fiction, with his final novel *September*; *September* appearing in 1977. The story of three white working-class criminals who kidnap the grandson of a prominent Black businessman in Memphis on the eve of *Brown v. Board of Education*, and told from the perspective of several characters of both races, the novel is intended to have some social sweep. But all of its narrators, in their interwoven accounts, speak like Shelby Foote—with the criminals improbably sharing their author's taste for Sibelius, or musing to themselves that Mark Twain is going to



Solar Power

From the National Library of Israel

Abraham bar Hiyya (1070-1136) was a Spanish Jewish mathematician and astronomer famed for his book *Hibbur ha-Meshihah ve-ha-Tishboret* (Treatise on Measurement and Calculation), translated into Latin by Plato of Tivoli as *Liber embadorum* in 1145 and recognized as the earliest Arab algebra written in Europe. He also penned *Tzurat Ha'Aretz VeTavnit Kadurei Ha'Rekia* ("The Form of the Earth and the Pattern of the Heavenly Spheres"). According to Shay Eshel, the treatise presented the geographical sciences of both the Islamic and ancient worlds in Hebrew and included this rendering of the solar system.

—Alyssa Quint

get book-banned and branded as a "racist" one of these days.

One of the criminals, Reeny, a middle-aged fallen woman, gives an account of her sexual history in a style at once excellent and utterly incredible:

That was the first, a Waco lumber dealer close to sixty. Others followed, to swing deals, promote relationships, sometimes just to get living-money ... It wasn't near as bad as it sounds ... As a profession it's got it's points, so long as you don't stay in it so long you stop learning and start enduring

... All there was for me was men, and I kept trying ... I got nothing from the Texan, not even train fare, and all I got from the Mississippian was a second-hand Ford, my worldly goods. I decided I'd better take it day by day, not get tied up, and trust to fortune. Around that time, Grace Kelly got to be princess without putting anything down, or very little. But she had folks and money to take her wherever she wanted to go, and where was I going to find myself a prince? At Bull Eye's, that's where; Rufus.

This extract from a three-page monologue is thrilling stuff—Reeny speaks like a queen out of Shakespeare, and why shouldn't, as D.H. Lawrence put it, "trivial people muse and thunder in such magnificent language," except that it seems rather unnecessary to have multiple perspectives at all if all their narrators are going to talk like that. Faulkner, at the height of his powers in stories like, "The Old Man," could write in a kind of cornpone-schizo-Biblical river of prose for the voice of his narration, and yet his characters—reluctant storytellers, slick operators, the taciturn and voluble, the semi-educated and the utterly ignorant—each ring out accurately their natures in language particular to them. There Foote never measured up.

In the years after *September, September*, Foote made pretenses of finishing *Two Gates*; as late as 1991 the Southern literary critic Cleanth Brooks was still urging him to finish his "big novel" and secure his place in the canon. But the diaries of his last three and a half decades record him enjoying success's comforts—he had lived leanly in the years he'd learned to write, often borrowing money from friends, depriving, and alienating, his first two wives and daughter, and now was lavish and plumply indolent.

Foote's failure in *September, September* to go beyond where he had left off in the early 1950s, at the edge of his long depressive episode, and to make progress on his much-put-off intergenerational Delta epic *Two Gates* could have been, rather than the beginning of Foote's retirement, occasion for him to confront

the theme he had only touched once in his earlier work: his mother's family. His only story about a Jewish character, "The Merchant of Bristol," tells of Abraham Wisten, a late 19th-century Vienna Jew who settles in the Mississippi Delta, opens what he means to be a store so magnificent it will set him among the local gentry, and soon finds himself ruined. He tells his wife, "I've lost my honor," before killing himself.

Here the foreign Jew, the merchant, reveals no stereotypical head for business but shows rather that the Jew has as much a keen and fatal notion of honor as the Southerner, to the utmost limit, a knowledge that life is too serious to be lived under any terms but those of self-respect and that the man who cannot consider himself worthy of esteem must force redemption with a last display of his power to command, by ending, himself.

Where was such a sense of honor when Foote attempted to be rid of his Jewishness, furtively converting to Christianity in 1942—getting confirmed in the Episcopal church—apparently out of social snobbism rather than religious reasons? Throughout his life, before and after his conversion, he evinced contempt for religion, and particularly for Christianity, with the heat of a village atheist in his letters to the long-suffering Walker Percy. He seems not to have told Percy, or hardly any other friends, about his conversion, and indeed never discussed it even in his diary—in which he marked the Jewish New Year, as well as Lee's birthday and Confederate Memorial Day.

Later he reflected, "I had to make a decision somewhere along the line whether I wanted to be a Jew or a Christian. And I chose the Christian thing because I figured that life's hard enough without having to carry that Jewish thing with you too ... it wasn't a question between choosing them as religions." Foote was confirmed in the denomination that, for white Southerners, means old money. It was the traditional faith of the planter class from which he had half descended, and of which, as his fame grew, he would more and more make himself into a living emblem or ambulant cliché. Becoming Episcopalian, even for

the average Southern Protestant, is a tactic of social climbing—one that fit well with, and perhaps made possible, Foote's three marriages (the final one successful) to upper-class gentile women from good Delta families.

As he was near to finishing the Civil War trilogy, Foote wrote Walker Percy describing how he watched a serialized TV documentary about World War II, and had begun "sobbing" during its episode on the Holocaust. He was, however, weeping not only for "the old Jews and the children, the terror that was on them—and somewhere among them, for all I knew, some kinsman of mine ... with his long gray beard and the old old faces on some of the children in the camps and the women stripping naked in the cold before they stepped into the shower rooms, already knowing what was going to happen to them inside, and then, later, the bodies, all crowded in a sort of pyramid from having huddled together and clawed their way to the top for air," but also "for the ones inflicting the indignities and the torture; in other words for myself, that I belong to a species capable of such action ... all those fine looking German soldiers; it didn't seem to bother them at all."

Foote's fiction has little such transgressively unconstrained empathy, such a kinship with victims and perpetrators. The sense of himself linked inescapably to the Jewish people and to those who commit the worst offenses against them may have been what, in order to live with any self-respect, let alone a great deal of publicly declared commitment to "honor," Foote had to keep out of all but his most private correspondence. Perhaps this is what, if he had the means to place it into fiction, would have made him a major novelist.

Such a Foote might have written the great Southern Jewish novel, a multi-generational story stretching from a ruined but honor-bound Abraham Wisten to a midcentury descendent confronting the Holocaust and his own guilt at having tried to murder the Jew in himself, who sees his Jewishness as a disfiguring burden but remains entangled—as much as any doomed protagonist out of Faulkner or self-hating, self-concealing Jew or homosexual in Proust—in what

he would be rid of and cannot help but look, lovingly and hatefully, back on.

Instead his literary monument is the Civil War trilogy, which, given his biography, it would be a grave mistake to imagine either as a bit of neo-Confederate hagiography or as objective history. It is, rather, a beautiful work of prose—and a powerful critique both of American politics and our conventional understandings of the relationship between politics and art.

In later life, after the publication of the trilogy, Foote sometimes expressed his regrets that during the crucial years of the '50s, '60s, and '70s, he had kept out of politics, commenting little on the Civil Rights Movement and its connections back to the Civil War and Reconstruction. The latter he did bitterly criticize, saying on various occasions that the victorious United States had abandoned freed Black people to terrorism and peonage (inflicted, he did not perhaps sufficiently stress, by many of the same people—not least Nathan Bedford Forrest—whose military feats he had immortalized).

But *The Civil War: A Narrative* is a political book, one that sets the Civil War not—as we increasingly do today—as a central chapter in America's long sinful history of white supremacy and the struggle to overcome it, but rather, indirectly though distinctly, with the Vietnam War as its unspoken background, as an epochal moment of American imperialism, to be at once regretted and, in the person of its great champion, Lincoln, celebrated.

In a 1972 letter, as Vietnam was coming to its disastrous conclusion, Foote paralleled the senseless carnage of American bombing with the "Gottterdammerung" of the last days of the Civil War, when Sherman burned and pillaged his way across hundreds of miles of the South, and Grant and Lee locked themselves in months of trench warfare as Southern civilians starved. This was a "rehearsal for later glories, such as Vietnam."

Throughout *The Civil War* (although he has been criticized since for attending so much to military history that he neglected the motivations of the

belligerents), Foote emphasized the radical aims of the "Jacobin" wing of the Republican Party. Already in 1862, many Northerners—and not only politicians—were calling for a total revolution in the to-be-conquered South. One Massachusetts colonel wrote his governor that the North must wield "permanent dominion" as a "regenerating, colonizing power ... Schoolmasters, with howitzers, must instruct our Southern brethren that they are a set of damned fools in everything that relates to ... modern civilization ... *This army must not come back*. Settlement, migration must put the seal on battle."

Today's politically advanced Yankees who see the scourge of settler colonialism as one of the founding evils of America, coeval with slavery, would do well to consider that Reconstruction—their ancestors' unsuccessful effort to undo slavery and its pernicious consequences—was conceived by its exponents, literally and explicitly and proudly, as a settler-colonial enterprise. To say the Civil War was a war of American imperialism, a campaign by the North—that is by the leading power of what we now call the "global north" of advanced industrial power—to absorb what was seen as a materially and morally backwards periphery is not to impose present-day categories on the past in a feat of paradoxically counter-woke presentism, but to cite the terms of the historical actors themselves. It should be difficult, although in their unreflecting bad faith so many progressives make it easy for themselves, to oppose both American imperialism—the self-righteous export of our own liberal-democratic regime and the imposition of our hegemony (when the former is not merely a mask for the latter) over the "global south," from the Confederacy to Central America to Iraq and Afghanistan—and slavery, racism, and other evils, which after all are only ever extirpated by the violence of empire.

Foote famously said in interviews that he would have fought for the South had he been alive during the war, and would fight for it now—that is, would lose, and perhaps die, knowing he would lose—if the war were to be resumed, as a matter

of “honor.” Tablet readers who recoil at this statement might reread Leo Strauss’ “Why We Remain Jews,” which argues that American Jews unable to believe in the religion of their forefathers, at least in the manner their forefathers had, who might indeed find it superstitious, outmoded, chauvinistic and lamentable, were bound nevertheless to continue to identify with it and defend it by just such a sense of “honor.”

The claim, rooted in a sentiment we are every day less capable of feeling, is perhaps an incorrect one, but not unfamiliar to Americans of many sorts who only a few decades ago looked out on what Allen Tate called the “immoderate past” and its passions and struggles back into which we descendants can no longer wholeheartedly or unreservedly project ourselves, and found in the notion of honor a means to remain in a kind of intellectually qualified but existentially committed fidelity to those whose lives had made their own possible, to remain sons and daughters of their mothers and fathers.

This readiness to fight for the South, however, had in no wise a counterpart in any sympathy for what the Confederacy represented. Slavery of course was abominable. Even taken on the terms of states’ rights, to which apologists for the Confederacy then and now often appealed—as if this were not merely a legal fig leaf for slavery—secession had been absurd. The leaders of the various Southern states resisted Jefferson Davis’ efforts to impose a properly working centralized government appropriate to the military crisis, and his attempts to mirror Lincoln’s unpopular but necessary suspension of habeas corpus and enactment of the draft.

Although they were fighting a “war for survival ... the ultra-conservatives ... who had done so much to bring it on, had been using the weapon of states’ rights too long and with too much success, while they were members of the Union, to discard it now that they had seceded ... It was in this inflexibility that the bill came due for having launched a conservative revolution, and apparently it was necessarily so, even though their anomalous devotion to an untimely creed amounted to an irresistible death wish.”

“Foote cast Lincoln as a brother-aesthete for whom even the work of holding together the Union was subordinate to—unless it was identical with—becoming a supreme artist.”

Compared to this trenchant, clear-eyed critique of the Confederacy as a “conservative revolution” that failed, and necessarily, on its own misconceived terms, any moralizing condemnation that it was, as it of course was, a regime founded on enormous human suffering, seems beside the point.

The Southern elites Foote condemned (the political men, not the generals and soldiers whom he admired) feared political tyranny, from the North and from their own leaders, even as they understood freedom as the ability to exercise unrestricted local tyranny over their own households of slaves. Foote, in contrast, celebrated Lincoln, whom even now many Southerners remember as a despot. Responding after a 1999 graduation speech to a young Southern man who asked him how he could admire Lincoln who had acted “almost like a tyrant” in arresting thousands without writ of habeas corpus, suspending freedom of the press and silencing dissenters, and generally taking upon himself extra-constitutional powers for which there was no precedent but which provided the precedent for the long growth of our modern imperial, nearly unbounded presidency, Foote replied: “He trampled on some civil liberties. He is without question—I don’t

know anyone who disagrees with me on this—the greatest of our presidents.” He then immediately dropped the political question, rhapsodizing on Lincoln’s eccentric manner of dress and character, “and above all he is one hell of a writer. He’s knocking at the door of Mark Twain and any other American writer you know.”

It was not that Lincoln’s political greatness—greatness that for Foote defined itself precisely in his willingness to suspend conventional political norms when the very existence of the Union, as he understood it, was imperiled (a willingness Confederate politicians, who still birthed their country out of a misguided attachment to abstract principles, resisting their own president’s demands for greater power, could not comprehend)—was inconsequential. Rather political greatness came to him as a consequence of his intellectual and artistic greatness, the swelling of what Foote called, from the beginning to the end of his narrative, “the Lincoln music.”

This “music” was peculiar, lofty but demotic eloquence so different from the pseudo-Ciceronian high-falutinness that predominated on the rostrums of his day—that expressed his deepening convictions about the universal moral import of the question of slavery in America and, as the war began, the task of preserving the Union not only as a model of a functioning mass democracy—the first of its kind in the world and still a precarious, doubtful experiment watched critically from the old autocracies of Europe and their world-striding colonial empires—but as the miniature or embryo of a planetary future.

Lincoln was in his wartime speeches ever more direct in asserting that the South must be defeated not only or even primarily to efface what he came to regard as the stain of slavery, but to demonstrate to a global audience and for the benefit for all posterity that, as Foote put it “world democracy, which was shown to depend on survival of the Union with the South as part of the whole,” could triumph over its enemies. In this respect it is Lincoln, even more than Wilson or FDR, who set forth in speech and confirmed in feats of arms the doctrine that the United States was

the vector by which the world would become what America is—the prophet of our empire.

Whether or not one salutes the imperial order, Lincoln’s manner of prophesying, his “style,” his “music,” was, Foote insisted in the penultimate paragraph of his Civil War trilogy, “an imperishable legacy.” Yet Lincoln’s brilliance as a writer, Foote often noted, went unnoticed during his own lifetime. “Apparently it was miracle enough that a prairie lawyer had become president, without pressing matters further ... In fact, so natural and unlabored had his utterance seemed, that when people were told they had an artist in the White House, their reaction was akin to that of the man in Molière who discovered that all his life he had been speaking prose. ... Natural perhaps it was; unlabored it was not. Long nights he toiled in his workshop, the ‘inner sanctuary’ from which he reached out to the future ... he worked with the dedication of the true artist, who, whatever his sense of superiority in other relationships, preserves his humility in this one ... the President was at work: which meant writing.”

Here Foote cast Lincoln as a brother-aesthete (and a brother in misrecognition from an unworthy public) for whom even the work of holding together the Union was subordinate to—unless it was identical with—becoming a supreme artist. Of course, Foote’s own writing is neither natural nor unlabored; it has the august pomposity of the 18th century—to which the Southern man of letters remains proximate in a way impossible to the Yankee for whom Pope and Gibbon are churchman and fauna—without the earthy directness of Twain or easy gravity of Lincoln. But he knew that none of these rhetorical poses can be learned without a sweated ascesis of long devotion—that they are craftwork, the achievement of which demands an isolation and egoism relative to other spheres of life and their inhabitants, a willingness to risk failed marriages, penury, unpopularity, misrecognition—a capacity to tyrannize.

Foote’s homage to Lincoln is not the merely political transcending of sectional differences or the historian’s disinterested recognition of greatness, but

a passionate identification. Whether or not Lincoln is most rightly understood as a man whose ultimate dedication was to art, to call him such was for Foote the intensest compliment—to name Lincoln a fellow and indeed a master to be imitated, if not in the texture of his sentences then in his toilsome, total commitment to *style* as the means by which he seized and surpassed politics.

In turn Foote’s account of Lincoln’s assassination is one of the greatest passages in American literature (and who knows it?). Here is the moment of Booth’s shot, which in its wild energy recalls the Faulkner of the ’30s from whom Foote first learned to write, and anticipates Cormac McCarthy (one of the few younger writers whom Foote admired and with whom he corresponded—one who continued on, as Foote at first had, the path of Faulkner’s crazily accumulating sentences of rough clauses and gristly blood-spattered newfangled verbiage careening around the violence of men) but with a balance and pacing he had acquired from the French tradition culminating in Proust, wherein great phrases, rather than pile and crash, swing in a rhythm whose apparent unpredictability conceals painstaking control:

Then it came, a half-muffled explosion, somewhere between a boom and a thump ... then a boil and bulge of bluish smoke in the presidential box, an exhalation as of brimstone from the curtained mouth, and a man coming out through the bank and swirl of it, white-faced and dark-haired in a black sack suit and riding boots, eyes aglitter, brandishing a knife. He mounted the ledge, presented his back to the rows of people seated below, and let himself down by the hand-rail for the ten-foot drop to the stage. Falling he turned, and as he did so caught the spur of his right boot in the folds of the flag draped over the lower front of the high box ... He rose, thrust the knife overhead in a broad theatrical gesture, and addressed the outward darkness of the pit.

As Lincoln lays in his deathbed, it requires all the lessons Foote learned

to keep the lengthy scene of mortality always just this side of melodrama, achingly sublime, with an edge of cruelty in its precise descriptions of physical symptoms and the derangements of grief:

[T]he stertorous uproar of his breathing, interspersed with drawn-out groans, filled the house as might have filled a torture chamber. “Doctor, save him!” she [Mary Todd Lincoln] implored first one then another of the attending physicians, and once she said in a calmer tone: “Bring Tad. He will speak to Tad, he loves him so,” But all agreed that would not do, either for the boy or his father, who was beyond all knowledgeable contact with anything on earth, even Tad, and indeed had been so ever since Booth’s derringer crashed through the laughter in the theater at 10.15 last night. All the while, his condition worsened, especially his breathing, which not only became increasingly spasmodic, but would stop entirely from time to time, the narrow chest expanded between the big rail-splitter arms, and then resume with a sudden gusty roar through the fluttering lips. On one such occasion, with Mrs. Lincoln leaning forward from a chair beside the bed, her cheek on her husband’s cheek, her ear near his still, cyanotic mouth, the furious bray of his exhalation—louder than anything she had heard since the explosion in the box five hours ago—startled and frightened her so badly that she shrieked and fell to the floor in a faint.

In a 1985 letter to Walker Percy, Foote lamented, “it’s no small sport to have written something as great” as the Civil War trilogy, “and to watch it go unrecognized for what it truly is.” The great increase to his fame in the following decade left unchanged the problem for his literary reputation, which he accurately defined: “Historians won’t read it because it lacks footnotes, and liberal arts professors won’t read it because it’s history; I fall between two stools and mainly find my following composed of ‘buffs,’ a sorry lot who know little or nothing of either history or literature.”

He had succeeded in a genre—historiographical nonfiction—that once, in the era of Voltaire, or of Francis Parkman in a younger America, attracted the finest talents to write what they meant to be enduring masterpieces less of erudition than of writerly prowess, but which now is divided into scholarly monographs not intended to be read with pleasure and airport-bookstore bestsellers about World War II or George Washington given to fathers on their birthdays. His success in this domain neither greatly raised the stature of his early mediocre novels nor taught him how to write better ones. He despised his fans. He was a sort of illustrious failure.

But, he knew, he had written a masterpiece. Let any future critic, he said, “pick up any one of the three volumes, open it at random, and read any two consecutive pages; he’d know right then what he’d got hold of. Yet he won’t do that till enough random eggheads have preached its gospel; then he’ll look into it and he’ll know” (as one of Tablet’s resident random eggheads I contribute my part to the fulfillment of Foote’s vision).

Much of the subsequent critical discussion of Foote’s trilogy has focused on its qualities as a work of history, on its supposed bias or admirable neutrality—or the moral and political character that his writing revealed. He is thus made out to be, as he in a Faustian bargain let himself be made out during his lifetime, a representative of the Confederacy and the post-Confederate white South, of its evils and incomprehensions (as though Proust were to be put on trial for the stupid turpitude of the French aristocracy he chronicled and snobbed in) or of its honorable, gentlemanly virtues.

Whether as Ta-Nehisi Coates once, during his heyday as NPR-listeners’ favorite metaphysician of racial polemic, put it, in his inimitably vile, condescendingly ignorant way, “Shelby Foote wrote *The Civil War*, but he never understood it. Understanding the Civil War was a luxury his whiteness could ill-afford,” or, as the ploddingly genteel conservative Jonathan Clarke has it in a recent milquetoast defense of Foote, “[W]e should resist the temptation to put our

“Foote’s present-day readers imagine his legacy as a site in the ongoing struggle between ‘political’ and ‘aesthetic’ modes of reading.”

reading life too much at the service of our politics ... [W]e should continue to read Shelby Foote with pleasure ... [despite] the fact that we cannot fully agree with him.” Foote’s present-day readers imagine his legacy as a site in the ongoing struggle between “political” and “aesthetic” modes of reading.

One of the clumsier defenders of a humanistic perspective against Coates-like woke-ist moralism has lately declared we are in the midst of an “aesthetic turn,” which, if her declarations have any power of self-fulfillment, might even see Foote recognized as a great apolitical artist. This would be an improvement on the present—on the captivity of his reputation to the buffs he despised or to commissars at *The Atlantic*, but it would be another, albeit minor, kind of misfortune unless we reappraise from the vantage of his masterpiece what “the aesthetic” means.

Foote—like Proust—is in some sense apolitical (how oddly and obliquely the war comes to *In Search of Lost Time*, of how comparatively little importance), seeming to set the egoism of the artist ahead not only of civic responsibility but his own domestic happiness. But this is not simply being apolitical in a mode of preserving the autonomy of the artist, or, more public-mindedly, of exemplifying qualities necessary to a

certain kind of liberal, tolerant society that can with evenhanded narratives soothe itself out of the immoderate past into the safety of what Clarke imagines as sedate readerly pleasures.

Beauty, though it may give pleasure, is first of all tyranny, the violent appropriation of attention and power. By learning to write beautifully Foote meant to storm the heights of our national and Western literature, to master it in becoming one with it—in a spirit of determined assimilative prowess—to become immortal in the only way he believed possible. To say that such a demand upon oneself to achieve the utmost excellence, a will to shine forever in the memories of men, is not political, is to imagine as unpolitical Achilles and Napoleon. To reveal one’s superior nature in arms or words is a primordial desire for and by which the space of politics—our law-bound life in common—is made (a point Arendt, that most Greek of modern thinkers, recalls throughout her work). Some of us desire to be better, and acclaimed better, than others, and give their lives over to discipline, sacrifice, and risk that they might be honored, if not by the contemporaries whose approval they alternately court and spurn, then by posterity.

Honor, a word that names both what we owe to the ancestors whose principles we cannot quite espouse and what we hope to merit ourselves from an audience of unknown descendants, is in tension with the values of liberal democracy. Within the horizon of the latter we may judge a work of art according to its contribution to the realization of social justice, or to its capacity for giving and teaching unpolitical pleasure, but rather shirk from admitting the artist to be a moral equivalent to the tyrant, someone who presumes to excel beyond the common measure and to demand the approval of us whom his accomplishments

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mark as his inferiors. It is hard for us to honor him. Hard too to honor ancestors who asserted, individually and collectively, their superiority over others, their right to conquer, enslave, exclude (and all of ours, whoever we are, did so—unless we prefer to imagine ourselves, members of whatever group, the heirs of innocents so incapable and inconsequent they never wronged or thought themselves above others).

The vocation of the artist, the soldier and the statesman are accessible only to those who can honor and hunger after honor, who, drawn backward into the past and forward into posterity, disjoint themselves from our flat present and its imperatives to egalitarian political correctness or “aesthetic” harmlessness. Perhaps we would be better off without such human types. Certainly we may not

want to become them ourselves. It may be too that we ought to speak candidly about them and what their fulfillment requires only in private, and in public to let them assume such guises as, for example, the gentlemanly, avuncular Southerner with a gift for stories about old times—entertaining, interesting tales that can go unnoticed as incitations to honor the teller and those about whom they are told.

Personal greatness, an aristocracy of spirit, persists among some members of a democratic people without our noticing it, *because* we do not notice it and mistake it rather for something safe—in this instance, representative regional character, a local quirk, or as a tragic case for the psychologists. It survives in concealments. Foote the Civil War historian conceals Foote the consummate

stylist; Foote the archetypal member of Delta gentry conceals Foote the Jew; Foote the wicked white man or giver of literary pleasure conceals the artist who, as artist, wagers his greatness against our mediocrity, insisting to the last that if we could only look on his beautiful work we would be forced less to enjoy ourselves than to honor him, and who can see the murdered and tyrant in himself. To keep alive—yet somehow render harmless—such passion for preeminence is a task for which categories like “the political” and “the aesthetic,” in their usual meanings, now seem exhausted, their renewal being, like Foote’s remembrance, the random egghead’s burden. ■

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ARTS & LETTERS

The Toxic Gentleness of the American Theater

Woke Bolsheviks are destroying a once-great art form from within

BY CLAYTON FOX

I recently saw a new musical at Chicago’s famed Lookingglass Theater, *Lucy and Charlie’s Honeymoon*, about two young Asian Americans who run off together, searching for trouble, challenging the narrative that they need to be responsible and studious. The music was great, as were the performances. The cast—led by Aurora Adachi-Winter as Lucy and Matthew C. Yee, who also wrote the show, as Charlie, was undeniably special.

But about every 15 minutes, the script would suddenly veer into moralizing about policing, or stereotypes, or revenge porn. For example, the “security officer” who becomes a central part of

the story proudly proclaims that their town has supplanted traditional police with “self-policing” and does so in a manner which suggests the line ought to receive supportive applause. It did. Each time one of these “correct” lines was uttered, what ought to have been a fun night at the theater, watching a legitimately creative new take on an old story, became stale and uncomfortable. One wanted to shout, *Who is making you do this? Blink once if you need help.* Just weeks later, Lookingglass announced that it was pausing all production until late spring 2024, and laying off about half of its staff. Similar stories can be found across the industry.

Things have been changing for a long

time now, but the changes were accelerated by the pandemic, with the power shifting heavily in favor of ambitious, angry, younger members of the community. The pandemic shut America’s theater doors. Then, while everyone was on Zoom trying to figure out how the show would go on, the principles of the Black Lives Matter movement—including the idea that “show must go on” culture is “driven by fear” and disproportionately harms nonwhite artists—became the new religion. If theaters couldn’t put on shows, they could certainly change their mission statements, promise to cull white staff and creatives to achieve diversity quotas, and scare off any wrong thinkers who might still be lingering in the wings, including unvaccinated artists.

Much of the revolution has been led by youthful millennial Bolsheviks with little to no experience starting a theater, producing a play, or fundraising at scale. (Forget about focusing a light, sewing a dress, or building a backdrop.) What they do have are extremely strict ideas about how to enact “justice” in their industry, a desire to maintain a bourgeois lifestyle in a profession that requires some degree of lack, and a mission to fundamentally change the purpose of theater, from being dedicated to the goal of sharing

some transcendence with their audience to making everyone involved in the production feel “seen.” They are proponents of what I call “toxic gentleness.” The reality now, as one perceptive theater-maker pointed out to Tablet, is that most of the younger generation coming up in the industry are far more interested in activism than art. The elders, meanwhile, have been under such unrelenting pressure to prove their loyalty to the cause of progressive goodness that they would rather retire than attempt to guide the *kinderlach* on their mission. And many have.

As a result, the American theater is in the process of committing suicide by a thousand cuts. Playwrights are pulling the rights to their shows over all manner of perceived shortcomings, sometimes while the show is already in rehearsal, forcing theater leadership to pay actors even if they can’t sell tickets. To get a play produced by a major theater is an extremely rare accomplishment, so the fact that playwrights are willing to cancel their own shows in order to further “the cause” lends credence to the theory that they are primarily activists, not artists. Artists know the most important thing is to share their work with an audience. “The play’s the thing,” some white guy once said. For activists, however, the show is secondary to the revolution.

Once capable of producing moments of explosive, life-giving humanity, the American theater is now a confused, flattened, and fearful shadow of its former self, teeming with excuses and finger-pointing and on the verge of bankruptcy. It has been hollowed out by mismanagement, grim economic realities, a lobotomized audience, and in recent years, a sometimes noble and sometimes disastrous attempt to right past wrongs by enacting current wrongs, following the method of Ibram X. Kendi. In this way, it is the perfect microcosm of our entire culture.

As always, the story starts with money. While Broadway gets most of the big press, the American theater world is much larger, encompassing a “regional” theater movement unlike any in the history of the world. (Well, except perhaps ancient Greece.) Regional theaters like Minneapolis’ Guthrie, Los Angeles’

Mark Taper Forum, Atlanta’s Alliance, and Chicago’s Goodman have spent decades developing plays and talent and creating an ecosystem of unprecedented opportunity.

When the Group Theater or the Stepwolf kids or the Atlantic kids or Wynn Handman at the American Place, or Ellen Stewart at La MaMa in the East Village started their outfits, they understood themselves to be part of a tradition of suffering: of hanging the lights *and* sweeping the stage *and* cleaning the toilets, and then and only then getting onstage and hoping against hope that people would show up. The idea that theater was a business that could provide a safe bourgeois lifestyle to its participants was not on the radar. In fact, when Zelda Fichandler, founder of Arena Stage and godmother of the regional theater movement, started Arena Stage, she says, “we scraped the chewing gum off the seats, hung the lights, laid the carpet, painted the walls, scrubbed the johns, and on a budget of \$800 a week set out to achieve our goals.”

But her success, and that of the theaters she inspired, intersected with the boom years of the Pax Americana, attracting wealthy donors who were happy to give—with strings attached. “We added the concept of associate directors and literary managers as the theaters grew and artistic directors got still more involved in fundraising and the like; we created development departments ... and, in general, we poured a lot of money away from art and into making more money in order to make art.” As David Mamet told Tablet last year, “I’ve started a couple theaters. Had the time of my life. And at some point if a theater is successful the bean counters come in and ... in any business there’s a situation where the bean counter drives the other guy [the artist] out and that’s what happened in the regional theater.”

The theaters built fancy new spaces and hired more administrators and their executive leadership got bigger and bigger paychecks. Eventually all the kids coming out of NYU and Northwestern and all the theater industrial complex boot camps started thinking about getting a piece of that pie.

No one told them that there weren’t

enough jobs to go around, and that the fancy new buildings and marketing budgets were all a mirage; that right under the surface, theater was still a terrible business, and it was only the donors who kept the lights on. There is no serious allocation of public money for the arts in the United States. In 2019, the total budget of the National Endowment for the Arts was \$155 million. That’s 47 cents per American allocated by the federal government for the arts. Approximately 28% of that is allocated to theater. So that’s \$43 million divided by 1,953 theaters. \$22,017 per theater. There are also no jobs.

Just using numbers from the Actors Equity Association (which doesn’t account for nonunion workers), in 2018-19, out of a membership of 51,938, only 19,369 were employed for an average of 17 weeks. So if you’re a theater actor, chances are, you’re not going to work at all, and if you do, you might work for one-third of the year. The same more or less goes for designers, writers, directors, and aspiring administrators. The industry cannot support tens of thousands of energetic young “theater professionals.” And so there is an entire generation primed to direct their rage at the system they’d always wanted to join.

Enter “We See You White American Theater.” On June 8, 2020, this organization of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color) artists released an introductory letter, stating:

“We have watched you exploit us, shame us, diminish us, and exclude us. We see you. We have always seen you. And now you will see us ... We will

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wrap the least privileged among us in protection, and fearlessly share our many truths. About theaters, executive leaders, critics, casting directors, agents, unions, commercial producers, universities, and training programs. You are all a part of this house of cards built on white fragility and supremacy. And this is a house that will not stand.”

The letter was signed by stars including Tony winner Cynthia Erivo, Emmy winner Billy Porter, Golden Globe winner Sandra Oh, Oscar winner Viola Davis, and many more.

On July 8, 2020, WSYWAT released a 30-page “BIPOC Demands For White American Theater.” The list, which I highly recommend reading in full, perfectly demonstrates not only the revolution in the theater but also gives incredible insight into the novel application of critical race theory as expressed in workplace anti-racism practices. It includes a series of truly extraordinary demands, including quotas for every position in the theater and its adjacent industries, requiring that over 50% of all positions be filled with nonwhite people on account of the fact that whites only comprise “11.5% of the global population.” Watch out kulaks! The document also suggests, among other things, that asking visiting artists to engage with donors at a fundraiser is akin to slavery, and that the rehearsal schedules must be reduced because, “for Indigenous artists and other peoples recovering from genocide, these practices are extremely detrimental.”

The implication, of course, is that in addition to the theater’s economic dysfunctions, it is also a brutally racist institution. And to be sure, there are some racially insensitive assholes in the industry. An article in the *Los Angeles Times* chronicles 40 different Black artists’ experiences dealing with racism in the theater, detailing some awful stuff,

and some that’s just clueless. Here are four more similar stories in *The New York Times*.

But many disagree. “It’s ludicrous,” says Broadway actor Clifton Duncan, who is Black, and now persona non grata in the business due to his public advocacy for keeping theaters open during COVID and opposition to vaccine mandates. “There has never been one moment where I’ve felt excluded or discriminated against in theater, not once, and to see these people pretend, and I’m just going to say that they’re pretending, that they have been excluded or locked out of the industry somehow, I’m calling bullshit.”

Theaters across the country jumped over one another trying to acquiesce to the WSYWAT list of demands, lest they be accused of racism. Some of the biggest advocates for nonwhite artists in the country bent over backwards to publish letters apologizing for their “blind spots.” And to be clear, the large part of the youthful Bolsheviks are white. Take Theater J in Washington, D.C., the largest and most successful Jewish theater in the country. Their “values” page (using, of course, the language of *tikkun olam*) is entirely devoted to anti-racism. Their commitments include “producing more plays that explore the intersections of Jewish and BIPOC lives,” requiring all employees (including artists) to “complete an anti-racism training/orientation prior to the commencement of their work,” and creating “a set of intervention protocols” for when audience members (read: annoying old Jews) make problematic comments at talkbacks after a show. They also write, “We’re immensely grateful to WeSeeYouWAT for their list of Demands for White American Theater.”

Theater J used to be known for the bold, Talmudic zestiness of its talkback program. The person responsible for this was former Artistic Director Ari Roth, known for being a relentless producer of new works, an amazing fundraiser, and also making lots of stupid faux pas. The story of his departure from the company he founded after being fired at Theater J, Mosaic Theater Company, is somewhat illuminating.

Five years into his new project at

Mosaic, in June 2020, Ari’s staff read him and his producing partner Serge Seiden a letter saying that as “Cis White Male leadership” they were “damag[ing] the mental health of the staff,” “bullying,” making staff feel “dehumanized, dispensable, and disempowered,” and creating an environment “where money is put above human beings.” The mostly youthful staffers went on to say they wanted the best for Mosaic and “a safe environment free of white supremacist culture.” One staffer, who spoke with Tablet anonymously, said that they didn’t think Ari was a racist per se, just that his leadership style embodied white supremacist culture (as described by white artist educator Tema Okun). For example, “paternalism,” a quality of white supremacy, is defined as: “those with power think they are capable of making decisions for and in the interests of those without power”—otherwise known as being a CEO, which Ari was.

Ari, who was a mentee of Zelda Fichandler, isn’t good at giving up control. He’s old school in every way: artistically (work 16 hours if that’s what it takes), administratively (he’s the boss), politically (a classical left-liberal, last of his kind). I spent extensive time a few years ago interviewing many of Ari’s colleagues in the D.C. theater community, trying to figure out whether or not he was the horrible abusive monster some had intimidated. He’s not, though he has certainly said things to coworkers he shouldn’t have and was not always very sensitive to burning out his staff in pursuit of his ambitious and sometimes impossible visions. What he is, as described by his friend, the Black D.C. cultural icon, poet, professor, and radio host E. Ethelbert Miller, is Jewish, chutzpadik Jewish. “When I saw people concerned about Ari’s managing style, you know Ari has a very Jewish personality. And if you’re not accustomed to that you are going to have a problem ... It’s Lenny, it’s Lenny Bruce.”

For that reason, over the summer of 2020, Ari was sent on a mandatory sabbatical by the board of the theater he created to reflect on his leadership style and learn the lingo of the revolution. When he returned, he discovered that

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the staff, who definitely had a problem with Lenny Bruce, had essentially voted to neuter his role as leader.

What Ari built at Mosaic was one of D.C.'s best theaters for new Black plays, as well as queer works, Israeli works, and Arab works. By my count, 18 out of the first 34 productions were by writers of color, though only nine by women. Fourteen were directed by artists of color. Out of 157 total roles cast, 98, or 62.4%, were played by actors of color—the national average in union productions is 23.3%.

Serge Seiden, Ari's white Jewish co-founder, frequent sparring partner, and managing director, is still employed at Mosaic and was not required to take a sabbatical in 2020. The reason for this tells you more about the effect of the woke revolution than anything else I could cite. Former staff described Serge as "a really solid human being," "like a teddy bear as a human [who] really cares and will cry in front of you because he wants so badly to do it right." In short, he's sympathetic. Open. Not a self-described "peacock" like Ari.

The deeper change in the theater community, upstream of the political demands (which do affect the quality of scripts being produced), upstream of the debate over which words and/or actions need to be excised from old plays in order to meet Ingsoc's standards, is the ascendance of a culture of toxic gentleness. The current crop of theater professionals, my peers, truly are snowflakes. And this is incompatible with the creation of dramatic art.

Even when I was at NYU (class of 2011), I had many classmates who felt that criticism of their work was like "being attacked." Directors in America's top MFA programs are being taught how not to "colonize" their actors' bodies while *directing them*. Actors refuse to play certain roles, after being cast, because they discover "triggering" things in the script, or they ask to be allowed not to carry out certain stage directions if they conflict with their activist concerns about how certain types of people need to be perceived. Younger actors frequently take "mental health" days and let their understudies go on while their

"The current crop of theater professionals, my peers, truly are snowflakes. And this is incompatible with the creation of dramatic art."

60- and 70-year-old colleagues shake their heads in disbelief. As one veteran said to me, he lives for this, and these kids don't seem to. "They work to live, they don't live to work."

In rehearsal rooms, people are "walking on eggshells" trying not to accidentally offend anyone by disagreeing with an interpretation of a scene, a line, a moment. Accusations of "racism" get thrown around by actors who don't like directing choices, even when the evidence is nonexistent or later proven false. In an attempt to weed out real abusive scumbags—and no doubt there have been many—all danger, all tension, all sex, has been sucked out of the room in favor of "safety." The result is a theater that is flat. So it's no surprise that even three years after lockdowns, theaters are hemorrhaging cash.

While theater as we conceive of it was invented by the Greeks in their great outdoor amphitheaters, in dialogue with gods, and deepened by verbose Englishmen in dialogue with kings, it was in the United States over the past 70 years that the theater took on its most elastic and vital form. In the United States, theater became the place where a fiercely independent people got to scream at the gods, tell the kings to go fuck themselves, and examine their own contradictions, hypocrisies, and

lusts. Theater in America was infused with an unprecedented *mélange* of influences, buoyed by a curious middle class, and urged beyond its limits by the chutzpah of a nation that believed anything was possible and that limits were for suckers.

I wish my generation aspired to live up to this inheritance. But to make this kind of theater requires a willingness to engage in uncomfortable conversations, to be held to impossible standards, and to go home some days feeling awful. What's the best play you ever saw? Something that genuinely made your stomach turn? That genuinely deserved a standing ovation? That melted your face off with palpable human truths uttered only meters away? You can tell me it's something you've seen in the last seven years, since things got so stifflingly cautious, but I won't believe you.

The legendary Broadway director Arthur Penn was interviewed in the 1990s about the state of the theater. He described going to a very mediocre professional production. Afterward he asks the director why a particular part in the play had been given to a particular actor:

'He's a great guy,' was the response. 'Prince of a fellow.' Well, perhaps, but send him home to be a prince to his wife and children; he is a shattering mediocrity. But nice and easy counts for far too much these days. Another director told me—proudly—that he had just completed his third play in which there wasn't one difficult player; not one distraction; not one argument. Can I add that these were among the most boring plays of our time? ... All great work comes to us through various forms of friction ... I keep hearing Kim Stanley was difficult. Yes she was: in the best sense of the word. She questioned everything; nailed everything down; got answers; motivated everyone to work at her demonically high standard ... Is that difficult? Bring more of them on. Is Dustin Hoffman difficult? You bet. He wants it right; he wants everything right and that means you and that means me. I find it exhilarating, but in our current culture, they would prefer

someone who arrived on time, shared pictures of the family, hugged everyone and reminded them of how blessed he is to be in a play, and who does whatever the director asks of him.

Perhaps it's time for something new. Something nice and safe and communal with horizontal decision-making. Something gentle and inoffensive to the point that it might be called therapy, rather than drama.

In fact, one of Minneapolis' famed

Black theaters, Penumbra, is changing their name to the Penumbra Center for Racial Healing and expanding their mission. They wish to be a place "where the community is called in to learn, rejuvenate, and stand up in support of racial equity. The environment we envision is peaceful, inspiring, and gently provocative, providing moments of deep reflection and respite as visitors navigate the campus."

On the other hand, says, Clifton Duncan, some of his greatest

experiences in the theater were the roughest around the edges, working with no-bullshit, demanding artists like Michael Mayer and Susan Stroman—two directors that certainly know how to get audiences in the seats. "If we keep kowtowing to the most whiny, bitchy, insecure, weepy people," says Duncan, "then that's the level we're going to be playing to." ■

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FOOD

Embracing My Whole Self, Through Food

I struggled with my identity as not-quite-American, not-quite-Israeli, until I learned a lesson from cookbook author Adeena Sussman

BY JAMIE BETESH CARTER

Growing up in New York City with an Israeli father and an American mother, I struggled with my dual identities, never feeling fully American, yet never feeling totally Israeli either. In the summer of 2018, when I was 30-something years old, I found myself in Tel Aviv trying to figure out who I was. Ironically, it was an American chef, cooking and writing about Israeli food, who helped me finally accept who I am and where I come from.

My father grew up in Tel Aviv, and he worked at his dad's fruit stand—what Israelis call *basta* in slang—in the market since he was able to speak. Those stands were our family's home base during our summer visits to Israel, and served as a reminder of where we came from. I grew up in the States, and always considered myself mostly American, and a bit Israeli. At home, all of our food

was "ethnic," and my parents definitely leaned into the Israeli parenting view on spontaneous play dates, as opposed to scheduling get-togethers far in advance the way my American friends did.

Even with my unease about my identity, I still found myself clinging to certain memories from summers spent in Israel as a child visiting my father's family. Before even getting out of bed most mornings as an adult, I'd open Instagram and watch as chef and cookbook author Adeena Sussman would walk around the Shuk HaCarmel in Tel Aviv. I'd watch as she'd walk around, showing the fruit and vegetables stalls, saying good morning to all the shop owners, and occasionally passing my uncle Ezra selling the best strawberries in the market. It made me think back to the days of being a carefree teenager, wandering over to the market after a long, sweltering day at Gordon Beach to grab a fresh mango from Uncle Ezra's fruit stand.

"*Boker tovooo*," Sussman would shout

at the shop owners in her American accent. I'd usually roll my eyes. "Why is this very American chef the face of Israeli food?" I'd think to myself. And while I was a bit bitter, I was even more thankful that she was giving others, and especially me, an inside look into the beautiful, crazy world of Middle Eastern food.

On a whim during a brief visit to Tel Aviv in 2018, I messaged Sussman telling her how appreciative I was watching her daily tours through the market, how it brought me back to my childhood summers in Israel, and how she inspired me to write down some Middle Eastern recipes I feared would be lost once my father's cancer took over. She responded: "Come over!"

I started sweating. Adeena was a stranger, and I am an introvert. I thought of writing back, "Oh just missed you, I'm already gone." Instead, I stood and thought for a minute, and hesitantly responded, "Be right there!"

Just a few minutes later, we were sharing coffee and stories about our families. She told me about her move to Israel, and showed me photos of her upcoming cookbook. I looked over to the kitchen counter and saw half-prepared food.

"Did I interrupt you cooking? I'm so sorry. I can leave," I said.

"Don't be silly. Stay. Want to taste the fish I made?" said Sussman.

We sat, chatting for far longer than I expected, and both cried. She, too, dealt with cancer in her family and told me how she spent the last months

of her mom's life living with her, cooking for her, and learning her recipes. We shared stories about our weddings that took place just a few days—and 5,000 miles—apart.

That's the thing about the culture in Israel. There's an openness, directness, and warmth that simply doesn't translate anywhere else. I told her that I would have never sent that message had I been in my beloved but hardened hometown of New York City. And she agreed: She would never have invited me over had she been back in New York. "Only here," we said with a laugh. As I left her apartment and walked down the stairs of her building, I felt so thankful for Sussman, an American chef I had once balked at, for connecting me to my Middle Eastern culture.

One of the things that added to my identity struggle and feeling of "otherness" growing up was Shabbat dinner. Every Friday night, for as long as I can remember, my family gathered for Shabbat dinner in our home. My mother would begin cooking Thursday night, and when I'd wake Friday morning, the house was filled with aromas of garlic, cumin, and paprika. Looking back, having Shabbat dinner with my family every Friday night was one of the most special gifts my parents gave me. But back then, not being allowed to go out with my friends felt like a punishment. When I was young, I *had* to stay home on Friday nights. This meant missing sleepovers with friends, birthday parties, and dances. As I got older, I was allowed to go out *after* Shabbat dinner was over; when friends would pick me up, they'd comment how I smelled like garlic.

After meeting Sussman, my life got a bit hectic. My Israeli mother-in-law passed away, I had a baby, and my Israeli father passed away. In that order. A few weeks after my daughter was born in 2019, I saw that Sussman published a cookbook titled *Sababa: Fresh, Sunny Flavors From My Israeli Kitchen*, and would be speaking at my local bookstore in Brooklyn. It was my first solo night out after giving birth. I hadn't spoken to Sussman since our meeting in Israel, but I knew I had to go. I bought *Sababa*, and

we hugged and briefly chatted while she was signing books.

Sababa is a truly beautiful, inspiring cookbook, and while I did make a few recipes from it, I still felt apprehensive about having to learn recipes from my own Middle Eastern culture from a cookbook—specifically, a cookbook by an American chef. I felt uneasy about not knowing these recipes by heart.

This summer, when I heard Sussman was writing another cookbook, this one titled *Shabbat: Recipes and Rituals From My Table to Yours*, I knew I had to sit down and speak with her again. This time, over Zoom, we chatted about what it feels like to have dual identities, the concept of impostor syndrome, and how she hopes her cookbooks are received across both cultures—American and Israeli.

Originally from California, Sussman lived in Israel for five years after college, then moved to New York for the next 20 years. Toward the end of her time in New York, she met her now-husband on a blind date, and within a year she found herself back in Israel. After they got married, she made Israel her home.

"I see myself as an insider/outsider in a culinary culture," said Sussman. "I'm an immigrant to Israel, but now, six years later, what I'm embracing is the duality of my identity."

I shared my insecurities with her about what often feel like dueling identities: being part Israeli, but always feeling neither here nor there. We discussed my recent insecurities about my cooking, and kitchen, not really including the Middle Eastern foods I grew up eating.

"My goal is *not* to be 100% Israeli," Sussman said. "My goal is to bring the most of myself, and the culture that I was raised in and not to mask those. We still make tuna melts in the house, and my husband and I both still love American comfort food. And even my approach to Israeli cooking definitely integrates how I was raised, and the kind of kitchen that I grew up in."

The lessons I learned from my meetings and conversations with Sussman just multiplied. I was so used to grappling with who I am and where I come from that I didn't stop to think about

what I want to be, and how I want to lean into the rich cultures and traditions—American and Israeli—that shape who I am as an individual, as a mother, and as a chef in my own kitchen.

While Sussman does get a fair amount of accusations of cultural appropriation, she chooses not to get triggered, and to accept it as part of her story. "For me, I think the idea of being an outsider in a culinary culture is an advantage because it allows me to step back and see traditions, ingredients, dishes, and rituals in a way that people here [in the Middle East] might take for granted," she said. "Moving to a new country gives you the opportunity to really frame your own identity. It forces you to look at who you are and what you're about. I think that a lot of us live in extreme comfort and familiarity, and that we should try and think more like people who are living in uncomfortable and foreign places. Maybe that would give us more compassion, which I think the world really needs right now."

Sussman and I talked a lot about the beautiful elements of Israeli culture: the openness, directness, the collectivist approach to society, and the extremely welcoming sense of hospitality. At the epicenter of Israeli hospitality is Shabbat. When Sussman was searching for an organizing principle for her new cookbook, she told me, she landed on Shabbat because it felt universal to people all over the world.

"I think people are waking up to the beauty of a time when we gather with family and friends to eat, enjoy, disconnect, and reconnect with our culture," she said. "In Israel, Shabbat is the central focal point of the week, both from a social point of view and a culinary point of view. And I felt like this book could show people something beyond what they might know about Israel, sharing a window into the culture of weekend cooking."

Discussing the beauty of Shabbat with Sussman gave me the assurance in my decision to often say no to Friday night plans so my little family of four can enjoy a Shabbat dinner together. Between preschool, work, and activities, our weeks feel very hectic these days.

Now that I'm a parent, I miss—and crave—that feeling from childhood, when our world would slow down, and we'd all gather together at our table to eat Shabbat dinner. We don't get to have Shabbat dinner every single week, but when we do, it feels so needed. Shabbat dinner gives us intentional time together as a family with nowhere else to be. It really forces us to slow down, plus I get to cook and share some of the foods my parents used to make at our Shabbat dinners.

My kids love the grape juice, challah, and “special” food Mommy cooks.

But most of all, I think they love just being together. They're still too young to have other Friday evening plans of their own, or know that there are events we've been invited to but declined. But when they're older, and those challenges arise, I'm hopeful they still find joy in our Shabbat dinners, at least some of the time.

What I learned during my conversations with Sussman is that if she could feel confident enough to write and publish beautiful, thorough, and authentic cookbooks about Middle Eastern cuisine,

and Shabbat cooking, then I could surely feel more secure in embracing my dual identities. I don't need to be one *or* the other. It's not so black and white. Some days I can feel more American, and some days I can feel more Israeli. Some days we speak Hebrew to our children, and some days we don't. It doesn't mean I'm an impostor, or confused, or anything more than someone who is made up of two distinctive, vibrant, and sometimes opposing cultures. ■

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FOOD

Jews and Joe

From European streets to Manhattan's Lower East Side, Jews have been deeply involved in the history of coffee and the café scene

BY ORGE CASTELLANO

On a crisp April morning at the intersection of Rutgers Street and East Broadway in Manhattan, Elise Lovaas, a tour guide with the Tenement Museum, remarked somberly to a man named Rob, “It's all gone.” A 78-year-old Jewish New Yorker who had relocated to Florida in the late 1990s, Rob hadn't set foot on the Lower East Side in over four decades until he signed up for Lovaas' tour. He was deeply moved, *verklempt* even, to see how much of the Jewish enclave he remembered fondly had been absorbed into the annals of history.

“I really was looking forward to have a good old cup of coffee here,” Rob told me, while gazing through the windows of what was once the epicenter of Jewish intellectualism on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Yet, the nostalgic *mensch* wasn't referring to the renowned Forward Building, the 1912 beaux-arts masterpiece that housed the offices of the

Forverts, the pivotal Yiddish paper of the Jewish labor movement. Instead, his nostalgia was for the Garden Cafeteria a few doors down at 165 East Broadway.

In an era when Yiddish newspapers were a daily fixture and their Yiddish-speaking readers thronged the streets, the Garden Cafeteria stood as a nexus, much like the renowned Café Royal on Second Avenue in the 1920s. A self-service eatery offering an array of kosher delicacies, Garden beckoned Jewish intellectuals and the spirited neighborhood folk alike. Among its regular habitués were Emma Goldman, Elie Wiesel, and the Nobel laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer, who drew inspiration from the establishment for his short story “The Cabalist of East Broadway.”

“The Garden Cafeteria was my second home,” Singer wrote once. “I ate there and discussed literature with my literary chums, gossiped about publishers, editors, and especially about the critics who didn't like us and whom we disliked. We also questioned the very

purpose of literature. What can it do? What has it done in the past? What can one expect it to do in the future? To strengthen our arguments we ate mountains of rice pudding and drank countless cups of coffee.”

Before New York City's coffeehouses became the egalitarian meeting grounds for intellectuals—both recognized and emerging—and played a pivotal role in bridging the city, Jewish immigrants, including numerous Jewish writers, poets, historians, and artists, had already tasted the liberating ambiance of similar European establishments. Several decades earlier, beginning during the Enlightenment era, these creative minds had unlocked the freedoms and advantages inherent in these urban hubs, all while sipping coffee.

“Coffeehouses served as a modern replacement for traditional *beit midrash* [Jewish house of study],” said Shachar Pinsker, author of *A Rich Brew: How Cafés Created Modern Jewish Culture*. “They became a second home and offered Jews a refuge from the anonymity of urban life. These places were inexpensive, democratic, and inclusive. But, most importantly, Jews were welcome here, unlike other most non-Jewish social and ethnic clubs.”

From the bustling lanes of Odessa and Warsaw to the refined boulevards of Vienna, Berlin, and even Tel Aviv, cafés played a pivotal role in the Jewish experience of the late 19th and early and mid 20th centuries as Europe underwent a

wave of intellectual awakening. This epoch marked a significant shift in European societies, with Jewish communities receiving a warmer welcome in many regions.

This was a transformative period marked by migration, assimilation, and urban growth. In these establishments, Jews seamlessly mingled with non-Jews, absorbing and contributing to secular culture. Through exposure to diverse media—from the press, to literature, theater, art, philosophy, and politics—Jewish patrons and leading intellectuals integrated broader societal facets into their own unique cultural and social fabric.

Those Old World cafés, which began popping up in Europe in the 18th century, were small in number, but were nevertheless significant. Not only were they social gathering places, they became street-level emporiums that nurtured a mentality, characterized not only by *joie de vivre* but also associated with Jewishness. So much so that in Austria, where *das Wiener Kaffeehaus* was listed as a protected intangible cultural heritage site by UNESCO, coffeehouses were seen by the Viennese as an inherently “Jewish space.”

During this vibrant era, Berlin became the creative hub for numerous notable Jewish émigré artists from Eastern Europe. Here, the Romanisches Café emerged as an emblem of the city’s soaring modernity and stood as a testament to the growing divide between Yiddish and Hebrew writers and their broader Jewish readership. The city occupied a distinguished place in Jewish culture over a long period from the 18th century to the rise of the Nazis. Marc Chagall, who set foot in Berlin in 1922, once remarked, “Never in my life have I encountered as many enigmatic Hasidic rabbis as in the inflationary streets of Berlin, nor seen such a congregation of constructivist artists as at the Romanisches Café.”

There were many cities where Jews congregated, moved from, and traveled between. The Jewish community of Warsaw grew from 15,600 in 1816 to 72,800 in 1864. Economic opportunities, political developments, escape from persecution, and a common shift

“With half of the city apartments lacking basic amenities like electricity and sewage, these cafés seamlessly transformed into living rooms, dining areas, reading spaces, and even offices.”

in rural economic conditions are among the chief reasons cited for the massive migration of Jews to cities in the 19th and 20th centuries.

“With the migration from rural to urban regions, they offered sanctuaries, and became third spaces, besides their home and synagogue,” Pinsker said of the European cafés.

In the bustling cities, coffeehouses became more than just venues for intellectual discourse and entertainment for many Jewish individuals. As they transitioned from rural settings to urban landscapes, these establishments provided essential services, becoming lifelines where they could sustain themselves.

“Sociability in the cafés wasn’t merely a product of leisure but a necessity driven by both economic and socio-cultural factors,” noted Delphine Bechtel, a Senior Lecturer and Researcher of Eastern, Balkan, and Central Europe Cultures at Sorbonne University in Paris. “With half of the city apartments lacking basic amenities like electricity and sewage, these cafés seamlessly transformed into living rooms, dining areas, reading spaces, and even offices.”

The creation of urban cafés has been recognized as playing an imperative role in the creation of European modernism,

which later was brought to the Americas and played a pivotal role in the development and construction of culture, intellectualism, and bohemia in cities like New York. By using the café, and writings about the café, as the focal point of such constellations of moments and spaces, we see how Jewish culture and modernism emerged side by side, each shaping and being shaped by the other.

According to Pinsker, Jewish modernity was born in the café, nourished, and sent out into the world by way of print, politics, literature, art, and theater. What these Jewish individuals experienced and created in the coffeehouse, as a multilingual and transnational space, touched thousands who read, saw, and imbibed a modern culture that redefined what it meant to be a Jew in the world.

In emerging cities like Warsaw, the presence of Jewish writers and intellectuals in cafés became more common and more pronounced in the last decades of the 19th century.

Regarding Lemberg (current Lviv, Ukraine) in 1910, Galician historian Franciszek Jaworski observed: “In the half-light of the cafés live whole groups of people, forming a characteristic and peculiar society, eager for nervous agitation and European breath, revelling in columns of printed paper, insatiable of the gossip of the big city, and above all of sparkling life, waves of vibrant light, arabesques of smoke, amid calls hailing waiters.”

The genesis of coffee—or more accurately *qishr*, a brew made from the husks of the coffee plant and not its beans—took place in Ethiopia. This early iteration of the beverage made its way to Yemen, and by the closing years of the 15th century, coffee beans and the drinks crafted from them had found enthusiasts in Mecca, Medina, Cairo, and Istanbul. By 1554, two enterprising traders from Aleppo and Damascus were credited with opening the premier coffeehouses in the Ottoman Empire, sprinkled across the cities of Anatolia. These establishments eventually came to be affectionately termed as the “schools of the wise.”

When tales of this invigorating drink reached European shores in 1582, coffee swiftly became a symbol of social

interaction. The meticulous art of roasting and brewing the beans transformed coffeehouses into sought-after destinations, revered in the Islamic world as “taverns without wine.”

Yet, like any novelty, coffee’s reception was a tapestry of varied opinions. While some found its taste disagreeable, its energizing properties were universally acknowledged. In religious circles, the beverage faced scrutiny and debate. The luminous kabbalist Isaac Luria deemed coffee consumption forbidden. In stark contrast, Italian Rabbi Hezekiah da Silva, opining in the late 1600s, asserted, “One cannot attain presence of mind without the aid of coffee.”

As coffee’s presence deepened, Jewish legal inquiries emerged. Rabbinical authorities grappled with defining its role, especially when coffee was seen as a “totally new thing that did not exist previously,” as historian Robert Liberles notes in *Jews Welcome Coffee: Tradition and Innovation in Early Modern Germany*. Austrian Rabbi Jacob Reischer, in his compilation of Jewish responsa, *Shvut Yaakov*, deliberated on various facets, from the permissibility of Jews consuming coffee made by a gentile on Shabbat to its status during Passover in light of prohibitions on legumes. Reischer’s stance was progressive: If a Jew ground the coffee beans prior to Passover, consumption was permissible.

Tracing the evolution of coffee and café culture, the role of Jews is both profound and expansive. In 1632, Europe saw its first coffeehouse sprout in Livorno, Italy, courtesy of a Jewish entrepreneur. The influence continued when, in 1650, a Lebanese individual fondly known as “Jacob the Jew” introduced the English to their first coffeehouse in Oxford. This wave of innovation soon saw Sephardic Jews partnering with Armenian and Greek merchants, leading to the inception of coffeehouses in the Netherlands and France.

By the 18th century, the allure of exotic commodities like coffee, tobacco, sugar, and chocolate was rising. Among these, coffee stood out for the Jewish community, as its trade was not

explicitly forbidden. Jews swiftly recognized this and embarked on coffee commerce. Their influence resonated in America, where the aftermath of the Boston Tea Party transformed coffee into a patriotic drink.

When Jewish immigrants from Europe settled in America during the 19th century, they carried with them a sweet legacy: the coffee cake. Rooted in German *kaffeekuchen* and streussel traditions, this delicacy soon overtook the English tea cake in popularity. As coffee evolved into a symbol of affluence and luxury, prominent Jewish merchants, aiming to align with the elite, became early aficionados of this beverage. The seaport cities of America witnessed several Jewish traders specializing in coffee.

Historically speaking, some of New York’s colonial-era coffeehouses like the Exchange Coffee House, the Merchants’ Coffee House, and Tontine Coffee House were hubs of commerce. Jewish merchants frequented these places, which played crucial roles in their community. Notably, in 1826, the first synagogue building of Congregation B’nai Jeshurun was procured at an auction held at the Tontine Coffee House, a site that would later give rise to the New York Stock Exchange.

Several Jewish families ventured into the coffee business during this period. The Shoenholts established the Gillies Coffee Company in 1840. Other notables included Joseph Martinson with his eponymous brand, Samuel Schonbrunn whose Savarin brand graced the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, and William Black whose ventures metamorphosed into the famed Chock full o’Nuts coffee shops.

As the competition for the coffee market heated up, a discerning entrepreneur, Joseph Jacobs, came into the spotlight. Owning New York’s first Jewish advertising agency, he took on Maxwell House Coffee Company as a client. Dismissing a misconception that coffee beans were inedible during Passover, Jacobs sought validation from an Orthodox rabbi, ensuring Maxwell House coffee’s kosher status. This collaboration led to a seminal advertising move in 1932 when Maxwell

House began distributing free Haggadot adorned with illustrations and advertisements. The campaign still runs, with over 60 million copies distributed to date.

Beyond trading, Jews significantly impacted how coffee was served. This influence is epitomized by the Anthora paper cup—a ubiquitous sight for New York coffee drinkers for decades. This iconic design was conceived 50 years ago by Leslie Buck, a Holocaust survivor, targeting the Greek-owned diners in the city.

Forty years ago, the Garden Cafeteria sold its last rice pudding and closed after 42 years on May 1983. The vibrant, discussion-rich coffeehouses that once dotted our cities seem to be a relic of the past. Though establishments like Blank Street Coffee and Starbucks are more accessible now—their modern incarnation offers a starkly different ambiance. Today’s coffee shops serve primarily as pit stops to grab a caffeine fix or a quick bite for most of its denizens. Yes, they may sometimes double as spaces for casual chats or as the backdrop for aspiring writers channelling the aura of 1990s cinema, often punctuated with frequent Instagram checks and free Wi-Fi indulgences. The shift is undeniable, and with technology’s unrelenting march, it’s uncertain if the vibrant café culture of yesteryear will ever return in its erstwhile form. Yet, amid this evolution, one thing remains indelible: the enduring heritage of Jewish life on the Lower East Side, the contribution of merchant Jews, and the lasting contributions of Jewish intelligentsia. This legacy stands tall, impervious to the luxury condos and trendy bars that now rise from its historic grounds. ■

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COMMUNITY

Our shared Jewish life, at
[tabletmag.com/sections/
community](https://tabletmag.com/sections/community)

Hamin Ta'amer

BY ADEENA SUSSMAN

INGREDIENTS

FOR THE TA'AMER

- 6 ounces shelled nuts, such as pecans, walnuts, or a combination (about 1 1/2 cups)**
- 3/4 pound 80/20 ground beef**
- 1 large egg plus 1 large egg yolk**
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon**
- Pinch ground cloves**
- Pinch ground ginger**
- 3/4 teaspoon kosher salt**
- 1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper**
- Pinch ground white pepper**

FOR THE HAMIN

- 1 3/4 cups (3/4 pound) dry white beans, soaked for 8 to 12 hours**
- 2 tablespoons olive oil**
- 2 large onions, chopped (4 cups)**
- 1 1/2 cups pearl barley (3/4 pound), rinsed**
- 5 medium potatoes (about 2 pounds), scrubbed, peeled, and quartered**
- 2 small sweet potatoes (about 1 pound), scrubbed and left whole**
- 2 1/2 pounds short-rib meat, cut into large chunks on the bone**
- 1 1/2 tablespoons kosher salt, plus more for seasoning**
- 2-3 tablespoons tkilia (recipe follows)**
- 3 tablespoons silan (date syrup)**
- 6 large uncooked eggs, shells on**
- 2 whole garlic heads, top 1/2 inch removed**

FOR THE TKILIA

- 1/2 cup vegetable oil**
- 20 small dried hot chilies, such as chilies de arbol, stems removed**

PREPARATION

TO MAKE THE TA'AMER

Place the nuts in the bowl of a food processor and process until the nuts resemble fine crumbs, 10 to 15 seconds, making sure to not overprocess them into a paste. Transfer to a bowl and gently mix with the beef, nuts, egg, egg yolk, cinnamon, cloves, ginger, salt, and black and white peppers with your hands until incorporated. Form the mixture into a 3 × 9-inch log and wrap it in cheesecloth, tying the ends in knots to secure it.

TO MAKE THE HAMIN

Arrange a rack in your oven to leave space for a very large (10-to 12-quart) lidded pot, then preheat the oven to 200°F. Drain the soaked beans and reserve. In the pot, heat the oil over medium heat. Add the onions and cook, stirring, until they begin to soften, 5 to 6 minutes. Remove from the heat, then layer in the barley, beans, potatoes, sweet potatoes, and meat. Fill the pot with water until all of the ingredients are entirely covered by 1 1/2 inches. Add the salt, tkilia, and silan, then nestle the ta'amer, the uncooked, shell-on eggs, and the garlic heads on top. Bring to a boil, then cover and transfer the pot to the oven. Cook for at least 12 hours and up to 16, depending on how much you want to reduce the liquid in your hamin (you can also uncover it during the last hour or two of cooking to further reduce the liquid). Uncover, then remove and unwrap the ta'amer and shell the eggs. Taste the hamin and season with more salt if desired. Serve the hamin in bowls with pieces of the ta'amer and the eggs.

TO MAKE THE TKILIA

In a medium skillet, heat 1/4 cup of the oil over medium heat. Add the chilies and cook, stirring, until fragrant and crispy, 45 seconds to 1 minute. Cool, then transfer chilies and oil to a mini food processor or bowl of a standard food processor and process until smooth, 10 to 15 seconds. Scrape into a jar and cover with the remaining 1/4 cup oil. Refrigerated in an airtight container, tkilia will keep for up to 1 year.

Yield: Serves 12