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ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

Hezekiah's Mistake

As Netanyahu tries to manage relations with a fracturing American empire, he would do well to read Isaiah

BY TONY BADRAN

Israeli leaders, beginning with David Ben-Gurion, are famous for reading the Bible as the history of their people, and in particular as a record of the last Jewish experiment in nationhood. Given that many of the constraints on the behavior of states and kingdoms in the Levant have remained more or less constant for the past 5,000 years, looking back to the writings of ancient Jewish prophets and scribes for wisdom about present-day statecraft is in fact a sensible exercise. Indeed, it can be easier to see the geopolitical realities of today from the vantage point of the past than from articles by modern-day think tank analysts and reporters. Benjamin Netanyahu, himself a voracious reader, should take note.

The book of Isaiah, for example, relates the story of a geopolitical dilemma faced by Hezekiah, king of Judah, in the eighth century. The Assyrian empire, the dominant regional power at the time, had conquered the Levant, the land in between great powers, sacking Samaria and incorporating the northern Kingdom of Israel into the Assyrian realm. Under King Ahaz, Hezekiah's predecessor, Judah began paying tribute to Assyria, becoming a vassal state, like other statelets of the Levant. When, under Sargon, Assyria

became preoccupied closer to home, with trouble in Babylonia in the south and in eastern and central Anatolia in the north, the small Levantine states sensed an opening, and Judah found itself smack in the middle of a great power struggle of the type that has shaped and reshaped the Levant innumerable times since the Iron Age.

The Philistine city-state of Ashdod rebelled against Assyria, and tried to enlist Judah. Hezekiah wisely held back, heeding the Prophet Isaiah's advice against any fantasy of gaining support from Egypt, the major power center to the southwest. Sargon marched on Ashdod and crushed its rebellion, turning the city-kingdom into an Assyrian province. Judah was spared, having paid its tribute on time, but Hezekiah's impulse to revolt persisted.

Isaiah, by contrast, continued to warn against reliance on Egypt, now under Kushite rule, and which soon would look to back agitation against the Assyrians in the southern Levant:

Woe to the rebellious children, saith the Lord, that take counsel, but not of me; ... That walk to go down into Egypt, and have not asked at my mouth; to strengthen themselves in the strength of Pharaoh, and to trust in the shadow of Egypt! Therefore shall the strength of Pharaoh be your

shame, and the trust in the shadow of Egypt your confusion. (Is. 30:1-3)

The decisive moment came with the death of Sargon in battle in Anatolia. With Babylonia still unsubdued, and possibly also nudging the Levantine statelets toward rebellion, Hezekiah finally went against Isaiah's counsel, threw down the gauntlet and ceased paying tribute to Assyria. Worse still, he took prisoner the king of Ekron, an Assyrian vassal.

It was a terrible misreading of the balance of power. Sargon's successor, Sennacherib, promptly marched on Judah, besieged and took the major city of Lachish, and deported its inhabitants, while also dispatching troops to Jerusalem, locking Hezekiah "like a caged bird" within the city, as the Assyrian account described it. Hezekiah was made to pay a hefty tribute, and release the deposed king of Ekron, who was also awarded territory seized from Judah. But Jerusalem remained in the Assyrian king's sights.

The Bible's account of the episode is sardonic. The emissaries of Sennacherib come up to the walls of Jerusalem to relay the great king's message, which reaffirms Isaiah's words: Egypt is a broken reed, "whereon if a man lean, it will go into his hand, and pierce it." And that's what Hezekiah did. Only this time, the Assyrians, having secured Hezekiah's submission and collected an even larger tribute, miraculously march off, leaving Jerusalem under Hezekiah's vassal rule, thanks only to God. Although Jerusalem survived that particular encounter with empire, it fell a little over a century later, ironically at the hands of none other than Assyria's Babylonian rival.

The big lesson from the episode is that a small Levantine power that is tempted to play off bigger powers against each other risks absolute ruin if it chooses wrong. This is a lesson the Kingdom of Judah would relive in future encounters with external great powers—in which the inherent risks of being located at the crossroads of empire would be compounded by the dangers of internal Jewish factionalism. But there is also a corollary lesson to be learned, along with the one about

not leaning on broken reeds that might pierce your hand. And that is that what may be decisive is simply the whim of the emperor—and there is nothing that the client can do to influence it.

Fast forward to the 21st century, and the relevance of ancient lessons of statecraft in the Levant, whether drawn from the Bible or from Assyrian and Babylonian annals, yet remains constant. To be sure, Israel today is no longer the weak biblical statelet it once was. While structural vulnerabilities of size and geography remain, Israel today is a middle power, a technological leader that fields an advanced military with powerful capabilities. It has defeated every attempt made by hostile neighbors to inflict defeat and destruction upon it. More to the point, Israel chose wisely in the contest of great powers during the Cold War, and has helped amplify and project U.S. power, particularly in the eastern Mediterranean.

Yet despite the enduring strength of the U.S. as a global superpower and local patron, Israel's strategic environment has changed in critical ways over the last decade. And save for a brief interregnum, which coincided with the first two years of the Biden administration, Benjamin Netanyahu has been at the helm, navigating Israel through this new terrain.

During this decade, Israel saw some long-standing threats sharpen, namely the threat from Iran, and security challenges on Israel's borders become more acute. Israel's strategic environment changed radically with the return of the Russian military to the region, ensconced in the same theater of operations as Iran on Israel's northern border. While Russia is a shadow of its Cold War self, it is still a formidable nuclear power. But Russia, in itself, has not been Netanyahu's toughest challenge. The Israeli leader's biggest problem, rather, has been in managing relations with his superpower patron.

The prevailing Democratic Party narrative tells a different story, of course. That narrative holds that Netanyahu committed a cardinal sin—a variant of King Hezekiah's offense—by leading a rebellion against his American suzerain.

In the Democrats' telling, Netanyahu came to Congress at the invitation of the Republican Party and colluded with them to challenge a sitting Democratic president. In so doing, he factionalized Israel's position in the U.S., turning it into a "political football," or a Republican equity.

The problem with this version is that, unlike Hezekiah, Netanyahu didn't pick a fight with the empire. The empire picked a fight with him, and with the country he leads.

Barack Obama entered the White House with a clear vision for how he wanted to reposition the U.S. in the Middle East. He envisioned creating a "new equilibrium"—that is, rearranging the balance of power—in the region by realigning the U.S. away from the states that the American global power had traditionally included in its alliance system, and toward Iran. Such were Obama's declared aims, in order to achieve a goal that he called "balance." That is, to move the U.S. closer to an expansionist regional middle power that's been in conflict with Israel, and whose explicit objective is the Jewish state's destruction.

After decades of operating under a set of rules in a mutually beneficial arrangement with the global superpower, Israel woke up to find that the new emperor had changed his mind, and decided that he would now empower Israel's enemy and partner with it in multiple theaters throughout the region. In fact, Russia's return to the Levant, and the expansion of Iran's entrenchment there, emerged not as a result of a confrontation with the U.S., but rather with its acquiescence and protection. It must be stressed that while the motives for these actions may be open to interpretation or debate, it is simply a fact that they happened. Realigning the U.S. away from Israel and toward Iran is what Obama decided to do, and he did it.

By the time Netanyahu flew to the imperial seat in March 2015 to deliver his speech about Iran, Obama's realignment plan was already in its final stages. The distaste and contempt the U.S. president and his team had for the Israelis had become quite explicit. Famously, senior officials called Netanyahu a chickenshit,

gloating about how they successfully prevented him from taking action to stop Iran's nuclear program. The new emperor personally spoke with palpable disdain for formerly allied regional clients, denigrating them as freeloaders who wished to leverage the power of the empire for their narrow sectarian goals. Years of undermining Israel's actions in its own defense with deliberate intelligence leaks were capped by Obama knifing the Israelis at the U.N. as he prepared to hand over power to his successor.

Netanyahu's petition to Congress was a desperate *cri de coeur*, an appeal to sanity in the imperial capital by a loyal ally who, even as he knew that realignment was a done deal, could not fathom the emperor's irrational whim. And indeed, the deal was done a few short months after Bibi's speech. In other words, far from constituting a nefarious plot to somehow thwart the emperor's campaign, the episode was an expression of impotence by a man who had been unable to change the course of empire and therefore looked to history for whatever measures of vindication or solace.

Netanyahu could not have imagined that Donald Trump would defeat the emperor's anointed successor, and that within a couple of years in office the Republican president would trash Obama's deal with Iran, halting realignment in its tracks. In turn, Trump's single term fostered a belief that things might return to the way they had been before. Unlike the fantasy of a U.S. alliance with a resurgent Iran—a country whose economy was a shambles, and whose internal politics was organized around hatred of the U.S.—America's former arrangements had a clear grounding in reality. Israel could offer its patron the fourth most powerful army in the world and a highly innovative tech sector, while the Gulf States, who were equally threatened by Iran, controlled OPEC+, and a large share of the world's oil and gas. It is to acquire assets like these that great powers bother with local politics in the first place.

In fact, the Trump interval would only underscore that there was no going back. What had happened wasn't that Netanyahu had "politicized," which is to

"All of international relations can be neatly reduced to the question of Democrats versus Republicans."

say factionalized, American foreign policy. In reality, the American empire had fractured and was now projecting its own factional divisions onto the world outside its borders. In place of prior unitary conceptions of "America's national interest," there were now only the interests of parties, which saw the world beyond America's borders in terms of friends and enemies in their own internal battles. Having publicly staked nearly the entirety of party leader Obama's second term on Iran, Democrats would now be friendly to Iran and hostile to Iran's enemies, Israel and Saudi Arabia—regardless of whether Iran, Israel, or Saudi Arabia were themselves friendly or hostile to America, a concept that had increasingly become an abstraction. As National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan described it, "We've reached a point where foreign policy is domestic policy, and domestic policy is foreign policy."

The fracturing of empire is a seismic event that creates a ripple effect. America remains a global superpower. Whatever it projects outward is felt acutely. And now it's projecting its fracture onto the world, which it views and classifies according to the categories of its domestic fissure. The foreign ally of the faction out of power becomes the foe of the ruling faction. The ruling faction

also fosters its own loyalists abroad against those it perceives to be allied with its domestic rivals. We've seen this manifested in Saudi Arabia and Israel, as well as in other states like Hungary and Poland in Europe and in Venezuela and Brazil in South America.

Netanyahu has already faced an attempt to unseat him funded by Obama's State Department in the 2015 election. But in the years since, the Obama faction has developed a new playbook for political warfare against its domestic opponents, which now, inevitably, is deployed abroad.

The Obama faction's sustained, multifaceted campaign against then-President Trump seamlessly fused the domestic and the foreign. The faction organized the campaign around the conceit of protecting "democracy" (or "our democracy," with its implicit opposition to and delegitimation of any system, democratic or not, in which "the other side" wins) against the onslaught of "authoritarianism," or more crudely, "Putin."

The initial conceit, which drew its original force from the now-discredited conspiracy theory in which the Russian leader was alleged to have "stolen" the 2016 election from Hillary Clinton by buying ads on Facebook and through "bot farms" that amplified false stories ("fake news") on Twitter, was then developed into a universal taxonomy that organizes foreign states into friends and foes: The forces of democracy against the club of regressive anti-democrats. People like Donald Trump and his pals—Jair Bolsonaro, Viktor Orban, Mohammed bin Salman, and, of course, Benjamin Netanyahu—are the foes of democracy, i.e., Putin's friends. "Our friends" are those factions that align themselves financially or ideologically with the Democratic Party in the United States.

In turn, foreign allies of the empire's ruling faction utilize this American-made conceit and its American-designed tools (the anti-Trump playbook), thus showing that they are *de facto* Democrats. According to the empire's new system of classification, the domestic rivals that they run this playbook against are therefore identified as allies

of the American ruling faction's own domestic rivals, i.e., Republicans. All of international relations, and internal political competition within states, can therefore be neatly reduced to the question of Democrats versus Republicans.

In Israel, we caught a glimpse of this integrated American-Israeli messaging machine last year, when Team Obama-Biden worked with its preferred prime minister, Yair Lapid, in the final months of his tenure, to ram through a deal between Jerusalem and the Hezbollah-run Iranian equity to the north. That was an example of how the Democratic Party's Washington-based comms infrastructure can promote its approved policies together with local client state political and media cut-outs (such as the reporter Barak Ravid, who is part of an internal U.S. partisan influence operation cultivated by Obama's former ambassador to Israel, who continued to reside in Israel after his tenure ended) to advance the American ruling faction's regional priorities.

We are witnessing this enterprise at work again today in the fight over judicial reform in Israel, which is exactly the type of domestic concern that in the bygone American "national interest" framework could be expected to have exactly zero impact on Israel's client-state relationship with the United States. Now, it is easy to universalize such local squabbles, both for ideological reasons and because it is profitable for both local clients and partisan patrons to do so.

The twin of the "democracy" buzzword is "values." Israel must continue to adhere to the values of the empire's ruling faction, as defined on any given day, or face consequences. The "values" tool allows the Obama faction to launch endless campaigns against the undesirable, if democratically elected, leadership in Israel. "Values" can cover anything from "democracy," to "inclusivity" and "tolerance," to "racism," to settlements, and, of course, the Palestinians.

"We hope that all Israeli government officials will continue to share the values of an open, democratic society, including tolerance and respect for all in civil society, particularly for minority groups. We have certain interests

and values of ours," State Department spokesman Ned Price, an old Obama hand, said in a briefing—the hand-wave vagueness at the end of the statement being at least half the point. Today, our values might demand the expulsion of any minister who made statements suggesting sympathy with "hate groups." Tomorrow, they might demand drag queen story hour for Holocaust survivors at the municipal library in West Jerusalem—but not in East Jerusalem. The precise details of these demands hardly matter. What matters is whether you obey the party or not.

This ominous message got juiced up with the judicial reform proposal. "The U.S.-Israel relationship is based upon a lot of things. Democracy [and] shared values are certainly at the top of the list," warned Team Obama-Biden's ambassador to Israel in an interview with local, English-language media. The explicit threat followed: "We use those shared values to defend Israel at places like the United Nations," the U.S. ambassador continued. "It is very important for everyone to understand" that these shared values are "a very big part of our messaging." That is, the objectionable local faction might be democratically elected, but unless it commits to policies that advance the interests of its rival faction, favored by Washington, then the empire will target it some more.

The tactics of the Israeli opposition against the sitting Israeli government were immediately recognizable to anyone familiar with the hallmarks of the Obama faction's anti-Trump campaign. Israel's proposed judicial reforms are a threat to democracy, "100 national security experts sign a letter cautioning against the descent into fascism," "70 retail chain executives warn against the economic repercussions of Netanyahu undermining democratic institutions," and so on. As factionalism is at the heart of the transformation in America, it's little wonder that the fractured empire is now fostering factionalism in Israel, where it has found an elite eager and willing to align itself with winners in the U.S., even as, or because, it loses its political battles at home.

In addition to shunning certain Israeli government ministers, just like they do

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The legacy of Nazi laws can still be found in the official documents for our grandfather—and other Jews who had their names changed against their will

BY ERIC MULLER AND DAVID MULLER



with Hezbollah ministers in Lebanon, senior U.S. officials now underscore that their itineraries include meetings with “members of Israeli civil society”—much like how the U.S. deals with authoritarian regimes when it wishes to show them up in public. Israel may be a democracy, of sorts, just like Orbán’s Hungary, but it is not “our democracy.” At the same time as it amplified this internal pressure mechanism, the Biden administration was also pushing the “values” tactic through the familiar vector of the Palestinians. Following horrific terrorist attacks against Israelis, including one outside a synagogue, Secretary of State Blinken spoke of a “rising tide of violence” which “has resulted in the loss of many innocent lives on both sides.” Blinken not only drew this equivalence, and asked “both sides” to “de-escalate,” he actually implied that Israeli policy was the cause of Palestinian terrorism. While Netanyahu discussed his plan to disrupt the Palestinian “pay for slay” policy, Blinken announced increased funding for the Palestinians.

Part of the inherent sadism of the Obama ruling faction’s campaigns is the way they turn the target into the offender. From the Israeli perspective, the empire’s geopolitical initiatives are directly at odds with your national security, just as its requirements carry within them the seeds of your undoing. While it might appear that there is a set of requirements for you to meet in order to restore yourself to the good graces of your patron, in fact such a path is a mirage, since the ultimate request is for you to commit political suicide, leading to national self-destruction.

Faced with this formidable challenge, how is Netanyahu trying to avoid Hezekiah’s mistake?

For starters, despite this sustained attack that began with his electoral victory, Netanyahu has strategically projected an image of unshakable closeness to the empire, in part by appealing to the before time, i.e., the pre-Obama era. Hence, the Israeli prime minister has spoken repeatedly about how he has known Joe Biden “for 40 years, as a great friend of Israel.” He has spoken about his confidence in U.S. assurances

“Even Hezekiah was wise enough not to withhold tribute, at first.”

on Iran, and on working with Washington to advance peace with the Obama faction’s other *bête noire*, the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Does Netanyahu believe his words? Who knows? Either way, he has to say them. Not to do so would be foolish. There are two more years in this administration’s term, and there is no saying it won’t serve another term after that. Even Hezekiah was wise enough not to withhold tribute, at first.

As he does so, however, Netanyahu is looking around to see what moves he can make and where, so as to preserve his margin for maneuverability in case, or once, his stated confidence in U.S. assurances is shown to be unfounded. Take the recent strike against a defense facility in Isfahan, which officials of the American empire were quick to attribute to Israel and to distance themselves from. The distancing behavior of the Americans showed their hand, after the fanfare of the massive joint exercise between the U.S. and Israeli militaries, which was supposed to broadcast a message that the U.S. and Israel are in fact on the same page, even as the Biden administration continues to press for talks with Iran.

The Isfahan revelation was valuable in itself—no, the administration is not working with the Israelis to develop

military options against Iran’s nuclear program. And yes, Israel is capable of mounting large-scale operations inside Iran that the U.S. evidently did not know about before they happened, and was therefore unable to expose or stop.

The target of the strike was also a way for Israel to thread the needle. Netanyahu is facing pressure from Washington over Israel’s posture in Ukraine. After all, that, too, is a test of “shared values.” Are you a friend of Putin’s or of the forces of democracy? The play here is to trip Netanyahu up with the Russians, whom the Obama team helped park on his border in Syria. Now, however, the empire is demanding Israel antagonize Russia, which remains ensconced in Syria, and thereby damage itself—something Netanyahu has no interest in doing. By striking an Iranian military factory, Israel helped Ukraine without directly antagonizing Russia.

Problem solved? Not exactly, since the solution, for the U.S., is not strengthening Ukraine but weakening Israel. Naturally, Team Obama-Biden officials were quick to deny Israel any credit on the Ukraine issue, churlishly insisting to *The New York Times* that “they believed this strike was prompted by Israel’s concerns about its own security.” Never lacking in humor, Team Obama-Biden shortly thereafter renewed sanctions waivers that allow Russia and Iran to cooperate on nuclear activity at Iranian enrichment sites, which is to Russia’s benefit, and threatens Israel.

Staying the course outlined in his public commitments concerning Iran, both in terms of its regional tentacles and its nuclear program, is a strategic necessity for Netanyahu, especially in light of the Obama faction’s unwavering commitment to revive its deal with the Islamic Republic. Neutralizing the Iranian threat is the key move, both as it relates to Israel’s national security imperatives and also to Israel’s relationship with the American empire.

Other moves hinge on this decision. Along the way, Netanyahu can see whether or not he can accommodate the Saudis. Entertaining clever ideas about mediating between the U.S. and MBS is a waste of time that only affords the Obama faction more opportunity to

sabotage both the Israeli prime minister and the Saudi crown prince.

Netanyahu will certainly want to deepen his alliance with India. Among other things, that alliance will further consolidate the agreements and relationships with the Gulf Arab States signed under the Trump presidency, building on the recent Israeli sale of the port of Haifa to a consortium led by India's Adani Group, despite Chinese bids. The stronger Netanyahu's alliance with India, the better positioned he is vis-à-vis China, without alienating either the latter or the Americans, including the faction currently out of power.

Isaiah's counsel to King Hezekiah ultimately was based in a deep understanding of the power dynamic that governs the relationship between Israel and the small states of its geographic neighborhood, on the one hand, and the power centers that surrounded it, on the other. In contemporary terms, it was based in a fundamentally sound understanding of the nature of the

Levant as the territory in between greater powers. What matters are the dynamics and alliance structures outside the Levant's borders, among those larger powers who see it as an arena for power projection.

But what Isaiah's counsel also tells us is that while these were enduring structural realities of the Levant—after all, Israel's contending with Egypt and Mesopotamia/Persia bookends the Bible (and if you include the New Testament, you can add Rome)—the balance of power is never permanent, and smaller powers must therefore always continue to play the game.

Trying to divine why a great power takes interest in making a move in the Levant is not as important as the fact that it has made a move. What matters is the choice of how to deal with it without losing your head. Such choices can be thrust on you at any moment, whether you invited them or not. Similarly, struggling with the rationality behind a decision of the empire's current ruling

faction is an exercise in futility. All that matters is the current alignment of the pieces on the chessboard.

The ultimate measure of success or failure for Netanyahu won't be whether or not he manages to maintain a good relationship with Joe Biden. Nor will it be whether he joins hands with the Republicans—a faction that shows no signs of returning to power anytime soon. Rather, it will be if he is able to internalize his recognition that the empire has fractured, and create an off-ramp that helps protect Israel from the inevitable ripple effects of this fracture, including the wrath of the Obama faction and Israel's own internal splintering.

As a local client state, it doesn't matter how many talents of gold and silver you offered to pharaoh, or whether pharaoh is right or wrong in his estimations. What matters is that pharaoh has gone to war with you. ■

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NEWS

The Queering of Antisemitism

How an unlikely alliance between LGBTQ studies and anti-Zionism conquered American universities

BY CORINNE BLACKMER

Some years ago, I was the target of a series of antisemitic, homophobic, and anti-Zionist hate crimes on the campus of Southern Connecticut State University, where I teach. Aside from the death threats and property defacement, what troubled me most was how authorities and colleagues only acknowledged the homophobic part of the crime. Despite my protestations,

the anti-Zionism was erased and the antisemitism, which was not subtle—a swastika drawn on my car with mud—was severely minimized. On college campuses these days, LGBTQ concerns (as well as racial ones) always count. Anti-Zionism never does, and antisemitism only when it occurs alone—not in relation to other forms of social animus.

This series of hate crimes against me took place—in a way I have never found coincidental—during one of the

periodic eruptions of hostilities between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. Several days later, I again found my office door defaced, and death threats left on my office telephone. One faculty member I knew who had read about the hate crime on the front page of *The New Haven Register* rushed to empathize, calling me the victim of “the homo-hating patriarchy.” I winced at my colleague commiserating with me in an ideological language that I knew targeted me in other ways.

As a lesbian Zionist academic, I have felt my once-solid alliances shatter, and my beloved communities of belonging descend into warring camps. Over the past few decades, as the academic field of queer studies has become more visible and influential, some of its leading proponents have pushed the idea that opposing Israel's existence is a natural position for gays and lesbians to adopt. But, of course, it is not at all obvious why the progressive academics I once considered allies, who see themselves as champions of LGBTQ rights, have come to regard Israel—which has a sterling

record of civil rights for gay people, ranging from housing and workplace protections to adoption and inheritance rights—as the “hetero-patriarchal,” homophobic, and “homo-nationalistic” enemy of queers.

The fact that the academic notion of queerness and hostility to the Jewish state are now virtually synonymous is largely the accomplishment of a small group of postmodern leftist scholars, the most prominent of whom is Judith Butler. It is therefore worth examining the ideas expounded by Butler and others in her camp, and the effects they have had on universities and the broader political culture of the left, to understand my own sense of vulnerability and isolation.

According to my former allies, Israel’s protections for gay people and its thriving gay culture in cities like Tel Aviv should not be thought of as positives, but are in fact evidence that the country is guilty of “pinkwashing” its sins. Israel gives gays and lesbians rights, these critics contend, only as a means of deflecting attention from the country’s mistreatment of Palestinians. Moreover, Israel’s queer critics claim that touting the country’s liberal record on gay rights is a form of racism and Islamophobia used to paint Arabs as homo-hating barbarians. In stunning contrast, these same progressives regard Arab countries, which inflict state-sponsored, culturally accepted horrific punishments on queer people (lengthy prison sentences, honor killings, or death sentences) as subaltern allies.

When I pointed out to my colleagues that gay Saudi Arabian men were in fact flogged, and Iranian homosexuals hanged from cranes in public for the crime of homosexuality—and offered proof from human rights organizations—I was treated with condescending disdain. According to my colleagues, I had bought into the “Zionist narrative”—the pro-Western, pro-Israel, pro-settler colonialist, and, above all, Islamophobic media propaganda that represented Islamic countries as barbarous.

My colleagues’ responses introduced me to the post-factual, Alice in Wonderland mindset of the academic left. First, I was Islamophobic for daring to broach

the subject, since I had “no right,” as a “colonizing Westerner,” to speak critically about Islamic cultures. Second, I was told that most of the videos and still photos showing the hangings, floggings, and other brutal punishments were somehow forgeries or “fake news.” Third, supposing some of the representations were accurate, the “victims” were punished not for being gay but because they were anti-Islamic and pro-Western collaborators, out to “corrupt” and “destroy” their cultures—in other words, according to these enlightened progressives, they had it coming. Fourth, and relatedly, I was told that Arab countries resorted to homophobia only because of Western colonialism. Thus, even if these men were targeted for torture or death, they were partially at fault because they had courted danger by imitating “foreign fashions,” following the “Western model” of coming out of the closet. By this torturous logic, identifying themselves as gay or homosexual in public made these men accomplices of Western imperialism which meant, once again, that they should be seen as responsible for their own victimization.

These deplorable arguments did not, however, originate with the self-styled progressive academics I found myself debating. Rather these arguments originated in the work of three popular postmodern intellectuals: Joseph Massad (Columbia University), Jasbir Puar (Rutgers University), and, above all, Judith Butler (UC Berkeley). In *Desiring Arabs* (2007), Massad argues that “Western male white-dominated” gay activists, under the aegis of the “Gay International,” have undertaken a “missionary” endeavor to impose the binary categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality onto cultures where no such subjectivities exist. According to Massad, the Arab world is actually more “gender fluid” and tolerant of sexuality differences that do not express themselves in a Western fashion. Puar, the most antisemitic and anti-Zionist of the bunch, takes this logic even further, arguing in *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007) and *The Right to Maim* (2017) that Arab queers have more “sophisticated and nuanced” perspectives on sexuality than their Western counterparts,

not to mention a “healthy skepticism” about Western identity classifications. Moreover, in a twist on the pinkwashing allegation, she argues that the Israeli government, which is pro-natalist, gives gay and lesbian Israeli Jews civil rights only because, as parents, they will become “incorporated” into the Israeli “national project” and produce offspring who will maim or otherwise incapacitate Palestinians.

But the most influential of these postmodern critics is Judith Butler, a founding figure in queer studies who developed the now-ubiquitous concept that gender is a “performance” and that individuals perform their identities against a natural state of “gender fluidity.” Butler has been at the helm of the fields of queer and gender studies since the publication, in 1990, of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, which helped earn her an academic position at Berkeley. In the years since, Butler has become one of the few genuine celebrities of the postmodern academic left and a hero of sorts for the small clique of anti-Zionist Jews in America who wield an outsize influence in the academy and media landscape.

In *Gender Trouble*, which remains her most famous book, Butler rejects the idea that there are two biological sexes. Rather, she defines gender and sex as “essentialist” (a dirty word) concepts imposed on humans who are in fact “gender fluid.” Butler thus hones in on sex and gender as socially constructed performances. People who call themselves heterosexual mistakenly believe that their behaviors reflect an underlying truth and thus engage in coerced gender performances, made up of the gestures, language, and social signs conventionally associated with “masculinity” or “femininity.” Through myriad institutions, they enforce such performative illusions as if they were real in some foundational, preconscious, or biological sense. Relatedly, heteronormative people demean or punish performances outside these policed boundaries as unnatural, perverse, immoral, or inferior.

Such arguments undergird Butler’s fight against heteronormativity. However, like other postmodernists,

she overstates the role of language in fashioning the human sense of reality. These same problematic claims about the inordinate power of language end up playing a crucial role in her fervently anti-Zionist work, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (2014), where she (like Puar), is loose and inventive with the facts. One example can be found in comments Butler made during a 2006 teach-in held at Berkeley to address the war between Israel and Hezbollah. Butler was asked whether the left's hesitation to support terrorist groups due to their use of violence hurts Palestinian solidarity. Here was her response: "Understanding Hamas, Hezbollah as social movements that are progressive, that are on the Left, that are part of a global Left, is extremely important." Hezbollah and Hamas are both explicitly fundamentalist, religious organizations with charters that are reactionary—to say the least—in their attitudes toward women, gays, lesbians, and religious minorities. Yet Butler confidently declares them a part of the left, as if the statement itself is more important than the material realities of life under Hamas and Hezbollah rule.

Deepening the absurdity, Butler claims that she opposes the Jewish state because of her allegiance to a personally invented tradition of Jewish ethics which, according to Butler, not only repudiates "state-sponsored violence" but also enjoins Jews to live as benevolent "cohabitees" with the Other. According to the Jewish ethical "tradition" Butler spins in her intellectual Mixmaster, Jews should abjure having their own nation-state to avoid marginalizing the Other—meaning the Palestinians, who are supposedly indigenous inhabitants who were displaced by Jewish "settler colonialism."

Although Butler herself lives in a nation-state that exterminated and displaced indigenous peoples, she insists that Jews unwind the spool of history and dissolve their state, which she interprets as an errant project based on a misreading of the lessons of 19th-century European nationalism and the Holocaust. Although she never says so, Butler implies that in response to the

Holocaust, Jews need to recognize the terrible nature of all nation-states, and they should take their chances living in others' states despite their historical experiences with persecution and mass destruction. Unlike Butler, most Jews believe that having their own imperfect home is far preferable.

In place of a Jewish homeland, Butler argues for a single "state" which would end the Right of Return for Jews, dissolve current borders, and eliminate the institutions and symbols of Jewish sovereignty. Jews would "integrate Palestinian identities" into their own "personality-identities." What Butler means exactly remains tantalizingly and perhaps deliberately vague, for this concept is phantasmatic. It is unclear how this scheme would work in an actual political framework, or how such people would form viable modes of institutional, economic, or social exchange. If history and the geopolitics of the Middle East are any guide, the situation in a binational "state" would swiftly dissolve into mayhem and destruction. Lebanon, on Israel's northern border, provides a useful example to people who actually live in that part of the world, though it may be hard for Butler to see the facts on the ground from her office in California.

Despite these and other fatal problems with her binationalist (or bi-ethnic) fantasy fiction, academic audiences living far from the realities and complexities of the Israel-Palestine conflict greet her ideas with enthusiastic gratitude. At last, an ideal solution to an intractable problem that privileges the "victimized Other" while returning Jews to their traditional "ethical" (if marginalized) positions as disempowered (if indispensable) "middlemen." Further, since a world-famous Jew endorses this plan, it cannot possibly be antisemitic. Despite her objections to the concept of authenticity, Butler performs the role of the "virtuous Jew" for her audiences.

And that performance, it must be said, has been something of a success. In universities today, Butler's doctrines are repeated like religious dogma. Occasionally, there are quips about her inscrutable prose or whispers about her intellectual and ethical misadventures,

but she is mostly embraced as a queer and Jewish intellectual icon. Her canon has become something that wields such power in the humanities and, increasingly, in the social sciences, that it threatens academic freedom and intellectual innovation. As I have observed and have been told, graduate students, particularly Jewish ones, are regularly subjected by "woke" professors to harangues about Jews (and Israelis) that they would never contemplate with other minorities. Those who object to the singling out and demonization of Israel are often treated coldly, given bad grades, or refused letters of recommendation should their identities or alliances become known. Jewish undergraduates are assailed in their professors' and adjuncts' offices with posters reading END THE OCCUPATION OF PALESTINE, or maps that erase Israel.

Nor is this limited to university campuses. Dyke marches in Chicago, Washington, D.C., and other cities across the country have banned the Israeli flag from their parades on the grounds that these are anti-Zionist events, and displaying the Jewish Star of David might "make people feel unsafe."

Jewish and Zionist allies are getting the message that they are despised and unwanted. In queer and women's studies programs, the topic of Palestine is regularly inserted into the most unlikely contexts, to the extent that one student in a class about queer history told me that they discussed nothing but Palestine. The bitter irony is that by ostracizing and marginalizing Jews in the name of a postmodern ideology of queerness, actual queer people are made less safe. I would know: I am one of them. ■

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ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

The Jewish State and
its neighbors at
[tabletmag.com/sections/
israel-middle-east](https://tabletmag.com/sections/israel-middle-east)

THE REST

→ Western sanctions against Russia for invading Ukraine continue to look more decorative than effective as *Die Welt* reports on a **booming grey market for just about any luxury consumer good imaginable**, from high-end sports cars to iPhones and clothes. That manufacturers can't sell their wares directly to Russian consumers doesn't mean Russians are lacking access to Western wares. "A car is bought in Dubai and transported by ferry to Iran, then across the Caspian Sea to Kazakhstan. There it is registered in the name of a fictitious local buyer, who then sells it on to Russians and has it rolled across the duty-free Russian border by a car carrier," *Die Welt* explains. Smaller products like smartphones are simply smuggled in packages from other nations where little attention is paid to the banned list. The higher cost of the **grey-market goods has made them even more desirable in certain circles in Moscow**, where *Sankzionka*, or items on the sanctions list, have become a fashion statement.

→ A landmark national security trial in Hong Kong is underway for the **16 pro-democracy activists who've spent the past two years in prison after pleading not guilty to charges of conspiracy to commit subversion**. The defendants were a part of a group of 47 activists arrested during a raid in January 2021 after they organized an unsanctioned primary to select candidates to challenge a city assembly election they saw as undemocratic and deferential to Beijing. Chinese officials have denied interfering in the city's political process, even after imposing a controversial national security law on Hong Kong in 2020 that's been criticized as a tool to chill dissent.

→ Texas utility customers previously boasted the worst energy bills after a historic winter storm led to price surges across 15 states in the South and Midwest in 2021. But now **Oklahoma residents are leading the group of 15 states with the biggest premium on their monthly bills** as they begin to see what will be years' worth of surcharges after state officials rolled the costs incurred during the storm into bonds backed by the surcharges. Many Oklahomans are calling foul on the accounting maneuver for a lack of transparency about how the bonds were created, and there's increased skepticism of the **state's reliance on just-in-time natural gas supplies** that remain vulnerable to wild price swings caused by disruptive events like the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

→ **Number of the Week: 38,390.** That's the number of **points scored so far by LeBron James** after he broke Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's NBA all-time scoring record on Tuesday night against the Oklahoma City Thunder. Once considered unbreakable, Abdul-Jabbar's record was set in 1984 thanks in large part to his singular sky hook that has yet to see a practitioner of equal execution. James dethroned the longtime Lakers captain with an offensive style that utilized raw strength in the paint and a potent jumper that kept up with radical shifts to the game over the past 20 years.

→ An Iowa Alzheimer's care center **declared a 66-year-old woman dead and brought her to a funeral home only to find her gasping for air** and very much alive when staff unzipped the body bag. Nurses had declared her dead, which might have had something to do with the larger cocktail of morphine and lorazepam doctors administered to her after noting her "active decline." The state's health department hit the facility with a \$10,000 fine for the mistaken declaration of death.

THE BIG STORY

President Joe Biden all but announced his bid for re-election in 2024 during Tuesday night's State of the Union address. With repeated calls for the United States to "finish the job"—a campaign-ready slogan for a second term—an unusually energetic Biden touted his economic wins, including lowered prescription drug costs and the creation of several jobs programs, that could become a decisive advantage against future Republican challengers.

The culture-war retort from the former press secretary for then president Donald Trump gestured toward what's shaping up to become a key line of attack for several leading Republicans poised to take on Trump in the primaries. Even after a midterm election in which Republican campaigns built to take on the woke establishment failed at the ballot box in Arizona, Kansas, Michigan, and elsewhere, Trump has pivoted away from the theme of a stolen 2020 election and toward "race-based discrimination" in schools. Similarly, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis has made his opposition to critical race theory and gender identity topics in classrooms a cornerstone of his political brand, just as former South Carolina governor Nikki Haley wrote on Twitter that "CRT is un-American" soon after her plans for a campaign came to light.

—Sean Cooper

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'You People' Is a Warning, You People

The new Netflix offering accurately portrays the yawning void at the heart of secular Jewish and African American identity

BY LIEL LEIBOVITZ

Depending on who you ask, Netflix's new movie *You People*—about a young Jewish man who falls in love with a young Black woman, much to the bafflement of their misguided families—is either this generation's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, a brave and honest meditation on race relations in America, or the latest salvo of anti-Jewish vitriol this side of Kyrie Irving and Kanye West. I've got good news: It's neither. But it is definitely worth watching, because *You People* is just the major motion picture that American Jews deserve.

The action kicks off with the Viddui, the Yom Kippur confession of communal sins, liberal Angeleno Jews apparently being particularly fond of confessing wrongdoings real and imagined. But as the handsomely dressed Jews, drenched in the honeyed sunlight of the Skirball Center, are beating their chests, Ezra Cohen is futzing with his shiny blue-and-white sneakers. Not that we needed such a tell to inform us that Ezra is uncomfortable at shul: He is played by Jonah Hill, who co-wrote the movie with Kenya Barris, and who is to unease what Van Gogh was to starry nights—transforming the earthly sentiment into an almost divine state of grace. Ezra hardly has time to reach his shoelaces before his mother swoops in to chastise him for not wearing a yarmulke. I was informed by the credits that Hill's mother was played by Julia Louis-Dreyfus; if true, she deserves an Oscar for so

skillfully suppressing all of her charm and savage comedic timing (see under: *Veep*) and disappearing instead into some shrill *mieskeit* called Shelley who speaks no other language than tone-deaf virtue signaling.

She's hardly alone: As the good LA Yidn finish praying and schmooze outdoors, we get a gallery of beloved figures—Shalom, Elliott Gould! G'shabbes, Rhea Perlman—unleashing their inner nudniks and saying crass and mildly amusing things meant to telegraph to Ezra that though they are aged, they're still as woke as your average Vassar sophomore.

Ezra cringes, and rightfully so. It's one of the film's not-insignificant achievements that he is, through no fault of the fetid spiritual milieu from which he spawned, a sweet and decent guy. And soon, he runs into a sweet and decent gal, Amira Mohammed, played by the lovely Lauren London. Their meet-cute is both genuinely funny and also touching: He walks into her car, thinking she's his Uber driver; she accuses him of being a racist who can't tell one Black woman apart from another; he shows her a photo of said driver, who is indeed her doppelgänger; and the tense and terse shorthand of systemic racism and privilege, the lingua franca of our self-appointed intellectual and moral betters, melts into air, giving way to the more sonorous and timeless notes of two human beings genuinely trying to connect.

Which, this being a rom-com, Ezra and Amira soon do, reveling in having finally found a kindred spirit after so

many romantic failures to launch. And how could they not fall madly in love? Both, after all, were raised by parents who manifest their identities as performance art, full of sound and fury and signifying very little, as has become the American way.

Amira's father, you see, is a man named Woody, though he now goes by Akbar. He wears a kufi gifted to him by Louis Farrakhan, and projects all of the depth, knowledge, and dedication to his faith of a man who'd read the first few lines of a Wikipedia entry about Islam before deciding to convert and give study and practice no more thought. He is allegedly played by the great Eddie Murphy, though good luck finding hints of Axel Foley or Prince Akeem anywhere in the wooden and unfunny Akbar.

The two families meet. Hilarity ensues. Shelley launches into diatribes about police brutality, which she refers to as a "hot topic"; Akbar accuses the Jews of benefiting from the slave trade. We take neither seriously, because neither show anything near real human engagement with the beliefs they so facilely spew.

Which is precisely what makes *You People*, if not a pleasure or a comedic triumph, then at least two hours worth spending. If you're wondering why 40% of American Jews aged 18 to 29 identify as "Jews of no religion," it's because they were raised by Shelleys who prattled on about how important it was to be Jewish while making no effort to learn anything substantive or practice the faith in any meaningful way, instead having replaced progressive pieties for any actual Jewish ones.

"Ezra, you're my baby boy," Shelley sobs when her son breaks the news of his engagement to Amira, "and you found an amazing woman who makes you happy. End of story." Long, perfect pause, and then: "I mean, would it be nice if she were Jewish? Sure, our people's numbers are dwindling, and it would make your life easier, but this is great, too!" Big smile, speech concludes: "Our family is growing in such a cool and hip and funky way, you know? Oh my God! I'm going to have Black grandbabies! We're a family of color! We're the future now!"

It's meant as comedy, but so many of us have had some variation of this conversation in real life—the inchoate commitment

to Jewish particularism clashing with the gospel of cosmopolitan universalism and radical acceptance, with predictable results—that Netflix might as well promote *You People* as a documentary.

And the film hardly spares its Black protagonists the same treatment. The film’s funniest scene, by far, is the one that pairs Murphy with Mike Epps, the only person on screen who seems to be having any fun. He plays Uncle EJ, Akbar’s brother, and he pops by wearing the sort of Versace jacket that even Elton John would’ve turned down for being a tad too loud. Their conversation is a gorgeous and subtle set piece, each accusing the other of being a complete fraud and leaving us to wonder which is worse, putting on a fake designer jacket or putting on a fake ideological conviction. Whichever offends you more, the bottom line remains the same: When being Black is about little more than reciting fashionably idiotic and Twitter-ready creeds, don’t be surprised if your children run for the Hollywood Hills.

And the children, *baruch HaShem*, are alright. When Amira tells Ezra she’d like to have her imam officiate their wedding, the young Mr. Cohen is confused. “Your imam?” he asks quizzically, “OK, Miss Shakur, when did you get so Muslim?”

Amira is unamused. “I’ve been Muslim, I was born Muslim, and it’s important to my dad so I think we should go with it,” she replies. “Was that Muslim bacon you ate yesterday for breakfast?” Ezra asks, to which Amira, without missing a beat, responds, “It was Jewish bacon.” People, if you can’t see what’s not just genius but entirely accurate about this exchange, I have a Pew study for you to read. That’s decades of reducing complex commitments—to religion and tradition and peoplehood—coming home to roost.

In fact, so insipid are the film’s deracinated Jews that even the best among them can’t handle its one genuinely troubling moment, a discussion of the aforementioned rabidly antisemitic leader of the Nation of Islam. When Akbar praises Farrakhan, Shelley mildly registers her discomfort, while Ezra, eager to curry favor with his future father-in-law, praises the vilest of antisemites as the GOAT, or greatest of all time. When pressed to explain why he likes Farrakhan, Ezra, of course, can think of no good reason, and it’s of very little consolation that Akbar can’t either.

Is that terrible? Is it horrendous that in *You People* a vile antisemite not only gets a pass, but is defended and excused by Jews themselves? It is! And if you think it’s bad

that it’s happening on film, man do I have news for you about contemporary reality. IRL, generations of historically illiterate Jews possess neither the education nor the pride to know what to respond when someone lobbs ludicrous conspiratorial canards their way. That, and not Jonah Hill, makes me rage.

Will Ezra and Amira remain as clueless and cringe-inducing as their parents? Will they repeat the sins of their mothers and fathers and raise their future babies, as they themselves have been raised, to treat their heritage like Ikea furniture, something to assemble hastily, use casually, and discard at the first opportunity? Or will they make sure that their home is one where being Black and Jewish is a lived and meaningful experience rather than mere lip service? By the time the newlyweds dance the hora, these are the only questions that linger, because Amira and Ezra’s future is very much our own, and because if we’re not cautious, the sequel may be ugly. The spirit of James Baldwin, presciently name-checked early in the film, is strongly felt as the credits roll: *You People* is a sign. No more comedy; the tragic fire next time. ■

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COMMUNITY

Allied Forces

As evangelical support for Israel—once rock solid—erodes, one Christian group is promoting a different kind of allyship by showing up when antisemitic attacks occur

BY MAGGIE PHILLIPS

As antisemitism rises in the U.S., a pro-Israel Christian group is hoping to demonstrate concrete allyship to Jewish communities.

The Philos Project was founded in 2014 to increase understanding and

appreciation for both Judaism and Israel. In 2021, it launched the Philos Action League (PAL), a network of on-call volunteers around the country ready to show up whenever and wherever antisemitic attacks occur. Their volunteers often arrive with white roses in hand to show both their Jewish neighbors and

the world at large that they stand with the Jewish community. If there is vandalism at a synagogue or cemetery, they place a bouquet of white roses on the site. If there is an anti-Israel demonstration, they stand with the counterprotesters. If there is violence, they show up at the hospital (or memorial site) with a bouquet.

In Christian terms, it’s often called the “ministry of presence.” It is the belief that in a difficult situation, apart from the material assistance one may offer, there is value in being intentionally, mindfully present. Christian writers will frequently place this practice in the context of Job’s friends, who, according to the Bible, sat with him in silence for seven days when they observed the severity of his grief after the death of his children and the destruction of his livelihood.

PAL is led by a lean team consisting of four staffers. A strategy staffer tracks and reports antisemitic incidents and reports them up the chain to Philos advocacy associate Hannah Garces, who is in charge of mobilizing volunteers. Garces then consults PAL's roster of volunteers, determining based on their location who best to contact via text, email, and a call, with instructions about where they should go to offer support.

Garces said PAL provides situational awareness training for its volunteers, preparing them to handle themselves in protest and counterprotest contexts. She also said that many Philos volunteers come from Pathfinders, Philos' foundational leadership training, which includes historical context on Christian-Jewish relations.

Since its inception in 2021, Garces said the PAL network has a call list of 2,100 people in all 50 states and Washington, D.C., and have gone on 128 "responses" after antisemitic incidents. PAL Director and Philos Deputy Director Luke Moon has big ideas for the project, saying he wants action leaguers on site in response to antisemitism "every time, every time." The idea is to highlight for others how frequently such incidents occur.

Moon believes it is a practical solution for well-intentioned Christians who are unsure how to be allies. "It allowed Christians to respond in a very intentional way," Moon said of PAL. "People want to do something, but they don't know what to do. I think that's most of us most of the time."

Philos CEO and founder Robert Nicholson said over the phone that his aim with Philos is to help Christians understand that antisemitism "didn't stop with Hitler." He began the organization to address what he saw as the problem of American Christians' poor understanding of (and engagement with) Judaism and Israel. Nicholson, who described himself as an evangelical Christian in a 2018 lecture at the Jewish Leadership Conference, has written and spoken widely about the need for greater understanding and cooperation between Jews and Christians—particularly

evangelicals, who have been staunch supporters of Israel in recent decades, and have long been considered a strong influence in shaping American Middle East policy.

As a pro-Israel organization, Philos sponsors educational modules oriented toward improving young American Christians' understanding of Israel and its context in the Middle East. (Editor's note: Philos shares a common funder with Tablet.) While its work cuts across Christian denominations, it faces a significant challenge as support for Israel declines among younger evangelicals, threatening to erode a powerful pro-Israel bloc in American Christianity.

In addition to PAL, Philos has a spinoff organization, Passages. Now its own independent 501(c)(3), Passages began under Philos to sponsor Israel trips for young Christians, to give them firsthand experience with the region's cultural, political, security, and religious realities. Participants meet not only Israeli Jews, but Christians and Muslims from Israel and the Palestinian territories.

"Our goal is less to bring Judaism closer to Christians than to show Christians how deeply connected they are to the Jewish people—morally, historically, and culturally," Nicholson said via email. "Jews and Christians have some significant theological differences, but a shared reverence unites them for scripture and its values. The goal isn't to make Christians Jews but to reorient Christians on the Hebraic foundations of their faith and teach them the importance of Israel to the Jewish people."

Denominational diversity makes landscaping U.S. Christianity's attitudes toward Israel a challenge. Recent Gallup polls are illustrative: Catholic sympathy for Israel was at 60% according to 2019 numbers, mapping neatly with a 2022 poll in which 55% of Americans said that they sympathized more with Israelis than Palestinians. Meanwhile, 70% of Protestant respondents in the same 2019 survey described themselves as sympathetic to Israel. That number rose to nearly 90% when white, "highly religious" Protestants were broken out. Media coverage of prominent pro-Israel evangelicals like Mike Evans and

Christians United for Israel President John Hagee can give the impression that supporting Israel is an article of faith among all white, highly religious Protestants, who tend to be categorized by both themselves and others as evangelical Christians. But this impression can obscure the reality that there have been evangelical critiques of Zionism within their community going back decades, and that between 2018 and 2021, young evangelical support for Israel more than halved.

So what *is* an evangelical? "More of an exit poll category," *New York Times* opinion columnist David French said in a 2021 Tablet interview. In his book *Nonverts: The Making of Ex Christian America*, sociologist Stephen Bullivant echoes this idea, saying evangelicalism is less a set of doctrines than "a distinctive subcultural world: a 'sacred umbrella,' which provides 'a shared identity, language, and worldview—along with prescribed norms and practices.'" This in turn creates a parallel, pervasive evangelical internal culture.

The particular beliefs that would go on to inform much of American evangelicals' interest in Israel have their roots in 19th-century Britain. There, Anglican priests Louis Way and John Nelson Darby developed a theological schema of the end of the world, based on their reading of Christian scriptures. Their combined view was of a restoration of the Jewish people to the land of Palestine, setting "the clock of Biblical prophecy [...] ticking again." The Jews, now back home in the Holy Land, were primed to convert to Christianity during the tribulations that would precede the surely imminent Second Coming of Christ (or shortly thereafter). Darby augmented this narrative with a belief in a "rapture," or the sudden disappearance of believing Christians immediately prior to Christ's return, and the necessity of a Jewish state for God to bring his plan for humanity to completion, which meant replacing the current world once and for all with a new heaven and a new earth. These ideas were fairly radical in Christian circles, for the most part falling outside Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or traditional Protestant traditions. Darby

would spread his views with some success before his death in 1882, however, which would become known as “premillennarian dispensationalism.” Darby’s system, which holds that world history is divided into several progressive stages (dispensations), as the world falls into graver and graver tumult immediately prior to Christ’s Second Coming, survives with various shades of difference among fundamentalist and conservative evangelicals.

This worldview took hold among conservative American evangelicals in the early 20th century, as it was adopted by prominent lay preachers and evangelists. By 1948, a significant segment of evangelicals saw the establishment of a Jewish state as a clear sign. Premillennarian dispensationalism, something that until then had not been wholly mainstream in their movement, was on the right track. The capture of the West Bank in 1967 only served as further confirmation for many. By the 1970s, Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority had become an influential bloc in American politics, marrying Darby-esque support for Israel to cultural conservatism. It was a happy convergence of interests for some policymakers and shapers on the American right, who viewed traditional Christian morality, and a strong pro-Israel stance, as crucial to keeping the Soviets away at home and abroad.

A useful starting point for understanding evangelicalism’s ongoing political influence is 1976, which *Newsweek* declared the “year of the evangelical.” Born-again Christian Jimmy Carter was running for president, Billy Graham was a household name, megachurches’ cultural presence was growing, and it was the year Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker would launch their long-running talk show, *The PTL Club*.

PAL member Josiah in Crown Heights brings flowers to the Crown Heights Jewish Council to express solidarity following an attack on a Hasidic man in January 2023. The Philos Project

Conservative politicians and evangelicals continued to coalesce around Israel, as Ronald Reagan siphoned off evangelical votes from Carter to win the presidency in 1980. By the second George W. Bush administration,

“We see that antisemitism is here, we are calling it out, it’s hatred. And trying to replace that hate with something beautiful.”

Newsweek was looking back at its “year of the evangelical,” and addressing concerns over the threat of an emerging American theocracy. Yet even in 2006, when the magazine published its retrospective nearly three decades to the week after it published the original issue, editor Jon Meacham was sounding a note of temperance: “the traditional religious right is being threatened by emerging tensions between those who emphasize sexual morality and those who are looking more to poverty and global health.”

Of course, Bush-era fears of the transformation of the United States government into a full-blown evangelical theocracy never fully materialized. But similar concerns resurfaced in 2016 with Donald Trump’s presidential run and election, fueled in part by his support among white, conservative evangelicals. What these projections overlooked, however, was that the cleavage Meacham observed 10 years earlier was continuing apace. The split was between not only conservative and liberal evangelicals, but between young and old, and between the faithful and a growing chorus of disaffiliated “exvangelicals.”

The splintering between younger and older evangelicals on Israel is sometimes attributed to the former’s unfamiliarity with the events of 1948 and 1967. But

the widening of the rift has accelerated. Bullivant notes in his book that Ted Cruz, not Donald Trump, was evangelicals’ first choice in the 2016 presidential primaries. He writes that Trump secured their support in the general election due to a sense of “cultural weakness and quasi-desperation” on their part. However, if it was a marriage of convenience, it seemed to develop into a true love affair on the part of at least some, to the point that, per Bullivant, a Pew study indicated “that between 2016 and 2020, among white nonevangelicals expressing warm feelings toward Trump, around one in six *began* identifying as ‘born again’ or ‘evangelical.’”

But if evangelicals won converts during the Trump administration (at least nominally, since “a substantial minority” in a recent Pew study rejected the divinity of Christ, a tenet of Christianity professed by the very earliest Christians and by the Christian scriptures), they are losing cradle members. “The 2016 election would become the most shattering experience for evangelicals since the Scopes Trial,” wrote historian and evangelical Thomas Kidd in his book *Who Is an Evangelical?* And the Scopes trial looms large: In a 2013 *Jewish Political Studies Review* article about evangelical anti-Zionism, author Dexter Van Zile cites the 1925 Scopes trial as a pivotal moment in the shaping of American evangelical identity. He wrote that the trial, which pitted evolution against creationism, “prompted fundamentalism to detach from mainstream society” (Bullivant says something similar about the rise of the politically influential religious right some 50 years later, as society’s attitudes grew more liberal: “It’s not so much that these religious groups suddenly embraced a conservative agenda as they were the only ones left holding it.”)

This sense of being distinct, a people set apart, had helped evangelicals remain a dynamic internal culture, Van Zile writes. But in his article, focused on evangelical anti-Zionism, he attributes young people leaving evangelicalism to “a divergence between the theological and political beliefs” they have internalized from broader American culture, “and the teachings of the church into

which they are born.” In *Nonverts*, Bullivant theorizes that there was a corollary between the moral controversies of the Trump administration and the rise of the “exvangelical” movement of (mostly young) evangelicals. He quotes people disaffected by what they saw as the hypocrisy of their parents’ support for the president, whose personal conduct deviated from the culture and beliefs with which they were raised.

Bullivant adds other contributing factors for the splintering: Younger generations lack the “suspicion and prejudice toward atheists and the nonreligious” that marked the Cold War era, and mostly grew up amid post-9/11 concerns about the threats from religious extremism. Those who stayed within the evangelical fold, Van Zile writes, became eager to distinguish themselves from the negative stereotypes. Hence, he writes, in 2010, pro-Palestinian “Christ at the Checkpoint” conferences began in Bethlehem, aimed at evangelical Christians. Van Zile quotes evangelical leader Tony Campolo at the 2012 Christ at the Checkpoint conference, who, like the young exvangelicals Bullivant describes, sought in his remarks to distance himself from the stereotypical evangelical, and the popular conception that Christians “are anti-women, anti-gay, anti-environmental, pro-war, anti-Arab.”

Both in the language on Philos’ website, and in Nicholson’s own rhetoric, support for Israel and supporting Jews are interchangeable concepts. When speaking at the 2018 Jewish Leadership Conference about the need for what he calls “a strategic alliance” between evangelicals and Jews “for the purpose of strengthening our two communities,” Nicholson didn’t distinguish between the two concepts of Zionism and allyship.

In the estimation of Luke Moon—who has been with Philos since the beginning and leads the PAL initiative—prior to 1948, evangelicals were not especially Zionist for much of the movement’s early history.

Moon gave me a quick primer on 20th-century American Protestantism, beginning with the 1970s charismatic renewal, and the Jesus Movement, which came out from the West Coast

and the counterculture. As the 1970s gave way to the ’80s, Moon said, the mainline churches, which had been “the early pro-Israel churches,” began pulling away to form progressive Christian initiatives like the publication *Sojourners*, which takes a pro-Palestinian editorial stance.

The same year of Philos’ founding, in 2014, Moon wrote a piece in *The Tower* about how evangelical support for Israel was shifting. In the piece, he cited powerful evangelical institutions like Wheaton College (sometimes called “the Harvard of Christian schools”), influential megachurch Willow Creek, and Christian charity World Vision, who were sowing anti-Israel sentiment in evangelical communities. In our conversation, Moon described a U.S. Christian landscape in which he estimates around 20% were anti-Israel, 20% were die-hard supporters, and the rest constituted a mushy middle that was underengaged on Israel. Philos, he said, was intended to “capture that 60%” through programming that would engage them specifically.

In addition to the educational programs and the Action League, Philos has offices intended to engage Hispanic and Black communities, as well as arrange “VIP trips” to Israel for prominent evangelical and Christian leaders who would be disinclined to go under the auspices of evangelical organizations. “We were very intentional about tone, how you talk about things,” Moon said, eschewing what he said was “a lot of bombastic rhetoric” in an effort to “update the conversation a little bit.”

In a 2022 podcast interview with Tikvah, Nicholson compared evangelicalism to the other counterculture movements that sprang up around the same time in the U.S. in the 1960s and ’70s. “Israel, its mere existence in the modern world, has played a big role in fostering Christianity, and specifically evangelical Christianity,” he said, since the establishment of the Jewish state was viewed by many denominations “as a theological sign, as a historical, an eschatological sign that God was still active in the world, still cared about his chosen people, and thereby kindled this fire anew within large swaths of American

Protestants.” Likening pro-Israel evangelicals of that era to a revolutionary vanguard, “when evangelicalism was still something of a rebellion,” Nicholson said that as the original revolutionaries fade from the scene, subsequent generations are disinclined to pick up the standard. “That excitement that they felt in the ’60s and ’70s,” he said, “has really begun to diminish in the minds of young evangelicals for whom all those things are you know, they might as well have been 150, a thousand years ago.”

Moon attended a few events in different states solo as a counterprotester, such as a 2021 Teaneck, New Jersey, demonstration advocating for the U.S. to cut funding to Israel, and a pro-BDS demonstration in Vermont. He decided he couldn’t rely on his own social network to rearrange their schedules to join him on a moment’s notice: “I thought, you know, let’s start this thing where it’s just like, any time there’s an antisemitic incident, we have Christians show up physically.”

The idea for PAL was born, with staffer Hannah Garces suggesting members show up with white roses as a tribute to German anti-Nazi activists Hans and Sophie Scholl, who were guillotined by the regime in 1943 for their roles in the student-led White Rose resistance movement.

PAL’s form of resistance to rising antisemitism looks a little different than the Scholls’, however. “We’re not losing our lives for it,” said Garces. Rather, it is the ministry of presence. “When we go and show up, we bring a bouquet of white roses, to either the Jewish community center that was defaced with graffiti or to an individual’s home, if we can, someone who was attacked, to just say you have friends who are Christians who are standing with you. We see that antisemitism is here, we are calling it out, it’s hatred. And trying to replace that hate with something beautiful.”

Moon estimates around 80% of PAL calls for members to show up for an embattled Jewish community are met. “They’re excited to respond,” he said. And the responses from the Jewish communities in question are positive, according to Moon.

On Jan. 11 of this year, PAL’s Twitter

account posted a photo of a bouquet of white roses, saying that a volunteer named Meghan had delivered them to the Madison, Wisconsin, Chabad Jewish Center some weeks prior, in response to an act of vandalism at the UW Hillel Foundation. “It was very kind and much appreciated,” said Rabbi Mandel Matusof of the Chabad Rohr Jewish Center at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in an email to Tablet. “I told many students who were all very grateful knowing that there is a large community of non-Jews who stand with us against antisemitism and hate.”

A PAL volunteer also visited Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas, after a gunman held four people hostage in the synagogue in January of last year. “I was deeply touched by the sincerity of the gesture and the personal nature of the conversation,” said interim Rabbi Scott Sperling, who received the flowers from the young woman, in a text. “The Philos Action League seem to be genuinely concerned about making their impact be both about broadly combatting antisemitism and recognizing that real people are deeply affected by [its] poisonous impact.” Sperling said the congregation displayed the bouquet together with one delivered by a family from a nearby church in the synagogue’s foyer. “The thoughtfulness that they displayed during the weekend that we commemorated the hostage-taking lifted everyone’s spirits as they did mine. We deeply appreciated their kind gesture.”

Recruiting, however, is a different matter. Moon’s goal for 2022 was 10,000 members, and he got 2,000, “which is annoying to me,” he said. “I don’t know why it’s so hard.”

This shortage cannot be attributed solely to evangelical re-sorting, since PAL members are Christians of various denominations. Moon attributes many of the members PAL has attracted thus far to in-person encounters, such as the ones he had at Turning Point USA’s second annual America Fest. Moon said he had attended a panel on Israel that day with TPUSA students who had been to Israel earlier that year. Moon said the students described antisemitism as “a huge issue.” He “barraged them

afterward,” he said, letting them know about PAL and encouraging them to sign up.

America Fest’s roster of featured speakers included Donald Trump Jr., Blake Masters, and Lauren Boebert. I told Moon it might be surprising for many to hear these sentiments expressed in such a venue. “It’s very easy for conservatives to talk about Israel, very easy,” said Moon, who describes himself as a conservative. But, he said, “we haven’t been a good friend to Jewish people.” He attributes it to a lack of familiarity.

“I didn’t know Jews, actually,” said Moon, who grew up in Seattle, and has hopped around among various evangelical and mainline Protestant denominations in his religious life. “I don’t think I knew any Jews until I moved to D.C.,” he said, around a decade ago.

“On the conservative side, the challenge, a big emphasis of my plan for 2023 on the PAL side,” he said, “is relationships with Jews, modeling what that’s like, how to do that.” Moon is making that his goal, he said, “because I’m worried about conservatives not knowing any Jews, and therefore it’s easy when you don’t know anybody from the other side,” he said, to slide into prejudice and hatred. “Especially when you’re only conflicting over politics.”

Moon’s goal is to bridge the gap between Christians and their Jewish neighbors, “less for them,” he said of the latter, “and more for my side. I want people who listen to me to understand.” He cites concerns over children as an example. “I think there’s a lot of things the Jewish community does that I think that parents of kids across the board also worried about. ‘What have you done? How has it worked with your community?’” he said. “There’s a lot of things we can talk about in common.” He hopes modeling this kind of dialogue in a relationship will replicate in other Christian communities.

Randy Osborne is a PAL volunteer who came onboard after Philos pitched it to his organization, conservative interest group Eagle Forum. Osborne said they were skeptical on their end at first, but Philos “showed who they were, what

they were about.” He said he felt a need to get involved in response to what he sees as a rising tide of antisemitism in his state of Florida. “As a Christian,” he said, he felt it was important to show the Jews in his state “that we stand behind them, we support them, and this is not who we are, and this is not who our country is.”

Part of the Philos pitch at Eagles Forum had included an explanation of the White Rose resisters. Osborne said he had never heard the story before, but it intrigued him. It was to be the symbolism of the white roses that would smooth over some initial awkwardness when he arrived at synagogues.

Osborne said he has been on a PAL response a couple of times: in Tallahassee and Gainesville, Florida, after a synagogue burning at the former, and the spreading of antisemitic flyers in the latter. He describes being met with initial skepticism by the rabbis at each location. But when presented with the white roses, Osborne said, “both of them got teary eyed over it, it was just an emotional time.” They grasped their significance right away, he said: “They know what we’re there for.”

As the Scholls’ inspiration shows, PAL fits within both contemporary and historical movements of Christians attempting to combat rising tides of antisemitism through engagement and education. They are “standing on the shoulders of those who came before us,” Garces said. Before Luke Moon was Father Ed Dowling, the priest who advised the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. In a message to Tablet, Dawn Eden Goldstein, author of the biography *Father Ed: The Story of Bill W.’s Spiritual Sponsor*, described Dowling as “one of the most visible allies of Jews,” even before the Catholic Church officially denounced antisemitism in 1965. Dowling’s rhetoric before WWII, referring to the Nazis as “Europe’s hoodlum parties,” and praising a nun imprisoned by Hitler, earned him the opprobrium of his superiors at the time. Goldstein said that in 1934, Dowling also collaborated with Rabbi Ferdinand M. Isserman on a series of social justice lectures, and in 1944, opened his Cana Conference marriage support groups, intended to help

couples improve their communication skills, up to Jewish as well as Catholic couples. “At that time, it was unheard of for a Catholic priest to include Jews on an equal basis in his public outreach,” Goldstein said. More recently, on Dec. 14, 2022, the International Council of Christians and Jews put out a statement calling on U.S. churches to confront antisemitism in their country, which they described as “a level of antisemitic rhetoric and violence not seen since the Second World War.”

On both fronts, Philos has their work cut out for them: on the Christian left, flagging support for Israel, on the right, an unfamiliarity with Jews at risk of breeding contempt. “We do know that there is an education need

for the Christian community,” Garces said, “kind of to know what’s happening, how to handle it, and how to just be the best friend they can to the Jewish people.” Moon agrees, especially on the issue of antisemitism. “Jews know about antisemitism, like the frequency of it,” he said. “I would say until Kanye said what he said, it was pretty common for us to hear from people, ‘Oh, that’s happening? That’s a thing?’ Like, they just don’t. People are unaware.”

Garces acknowledges, as Osborne’s experiences attest, that the nature of PAL’s mission can be sensitive.

“You get looked at a lot of different ways, especially when you’re a Christian advocating for this, because I think people don’t expect it to come from there,”

said Garces, who grew up in a what she describes as an evangelical-adjacent nondenominational church. Countering concerns that she has an ulterior conversion motive, she said, “I’m just here to be a friend. We have a shared faith. My faith is only possible because of the Jewish people, so it’s just a natural thing for me to want to be a friend, I mean, Philos means friend.” ■

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FICTION

New York Is Over

Tablet Original Fiction

BY HANNAH LILLITH ASSADI

The crescent moon rises above a sign for another Days Inn, and we stop in a restaurant off Highway 70 in rural Pennsylvania. The customers in it are all real Americans and their faces make me even more morose—such blameless, sincere countenances, angelic almost, so hopeful, and so damned. They’ll live and die out here in the middle of nowhere. The economy will crash and another empire will rise and someone among them will get cancer soon and because of this their jeans won’t fit them any longer and then they’ll die. Someone among them will have a baby and their jeans will never fit them again. The baby will grow up to be a surgeon or a heroin addict and who will care? Who will know? Who will bear any of them witness?

“Where you folks headed?” the waitress asks. I’m making it obvious we’re just passing through. I have this superficial need to distinguish myself from these other doomed Americans. To notify her, the entire world that I’m still from there, from the city that never sleeps, because if you can make it there ...

But we didn’t make it there.

“We’re going to California,” my daughter says in her toddler accent.

“And I bet you’re gonna be a little movie star!” the waitress says to her.

“Sure is,” my husband says. There he goes, sounding like another real American.

The prettiest version of this story ends in California. Those golden hills like first love, the blue Pacific, the light, swooning and slow. But we can’t afford it there either, my husband reminds me. And I remind him, we can’t

afford it anywhere. “Pennsylvania is sorta pretty,” I say, our first morning waking up outside the city. I try to imagine the sentence: I live in Pennsylvania now.

“It’s a beautiful country,” my husband says, tapping our car, affectionately nicknamed Rhiannon. Before we even bought it, I saw Rhiannon in a dream. It was overflowing, and colorful clothing flew out of its open windows. In the dream, it appeared less like a station wagon, and more like a gypsy caravan, but I recognized it nevertheless when I first spotted it in the back corner of the dealer’s lot.

“What if we get bored?” I ask.

“New York is boring,” he says.

I want to believe it is true.

America goes on and on alongside me in the passenger window, and whatever remains of its pastoral prettiness has been anesthetized by all these gas stations, these housing developments, the billboards, so many of which are

HISTORY

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there to remind women that a fetus has a heartbeat. My husband and I begin to play a game where we try to guess what sort of people live in the homes that are visible from the highway. Often our imaginings begin or end with OxyContin. And Jesus. Some of them are even from New York. Some of them had to leave too when the rent got too high.

“God,” I say interrupting the game. “But really, what do these people do all the time?”

“What do you do all the time?” my husband asks. And I look back at my phone even though my eyes are sore. The hills have flattened, and a heavy rain starts to fall, obscuring the road, and all my husband does about it is curse vulgarly, then oh another McDonald’s, and shit, there’s no Coca-Cola at the rest stop, only Pepsi.

I can’t help myself. “Why does Ohio have three major cities that begin with the letter C?” I ask. “Wouldn’t one be enough?”

My husband ignores me, because he loves Cincinnati and everyone in it, these vacant strip malls and all their shuttered storefronts. He is probably thinking of the dream he had last night of the woman who looked just like me and gave great head. Yes, this is how he described it to me this morning in the lot of the Holiday Inn Express or was it the Super 8? But she had a private plane, he clarified. Was I supposed to be consoled that his fantasy girl resembled me or that someone who resembled me could be so rich and so talented at fellatio?

I can almost still touch those nights, those nights when I would keep watch on him from across a crowded party, as a woman touched his shoulder when he was still not my husband, or laughed too closely to his face, and there were the city lights reflecting down on them through some foggy loft window, and I felt aflame. On those nights, the women were always beautiful and always painters or writers and very clever and my husband was so beautiful too, and tall and strange. He had a dark mane of hair, Southern manners, and some money too. There was still some money. Nowhere is as seductive as New York

by night and the women in it all dressed in black.

But this morning, when he told me his dream, I felt nothing at all.

“All this space is just so morbid,” I go on, gazing out the window at Ohio.

“What you’re saying makes no sense,” he says.

“Don’t you feel that? How time gets so much heavier out here where there is too much space? Like funereal?”

“No baby,” my husband says, kissing my hair, like he really, really loves me, like he’s not thinking of the dream me but me-me, the one who is beside him now.

“I miss our apartment,” I say.

“Do you really wanna be one of those bitter New Yorkers who die there after never living anywhere else?” he asks. “In your rat den, having run your rat race for decades.”

“But what happens when we don’t have any more money for gas?” I ask him. “When we can’t pay for any more motels? What are we going to do?”

“We’ll live in Rhiannon,” he says as if it’s a joke.

Everyday feels like Sunday, and more so the farther away we get from the city. But really, it’s the Tuesday after Labor Day. The weekend has ended, summer is over, and the nation is in decline. We can still afford to eat, we just can’t afford the rent in New York. At the Cracker Barrel just past the border in Indiana, I tell my husband to use the other credit card. For the second night in a row, we settle on the country fried steak with three sides: green beans, mac ’n cheese and fried okra. “Yes, we’re all sharing it,” my husband tells the waitress. “That one there’s got a tiny belly.” And then he grabs our daughter’s stomach and she shouts with delight.

An elderly couple sits in the table adjacent to ours. “Why would you order your own when there’s free refills?” The man reprimands his wife. “Make that a Dr Pepper.” Then they do not speak for the rest of the meal. They also do not stare at their phones.

“Caleeefornia,” my daughter tells the waitress when she asks where we’re coming from.

“OOOH,” the waitress says. “They probably ate you up in Hollywood, you sweet thing.”

How interesting. Maybe we aren’t going to California. Maybe we’re already from there. That’s what we’ll say to strangers. But then I think of Prospect Park at dusk, fireflies rising up from the fields, music drifting through the trees. My husband’s hand in mine on a woodland path and we’re wine drunk on some late August night. The word “home” coos across my mind.

I have no memories of the West, but I know there are no fireflies there.

On the porch of the Cracker Barrel, I watch a man and a woman, faces scabby from meth, dig through the trash. I squeeze my daughter’s hand. “That’s not mommy and daddy.”

She screws up her face. “No, you’re my mama and daddy.”

“The other, other card,” I tell my husband again.

“I already heard you,” he says.

So many things return to me now, now that we won’t get it back, now that someone else is dreaming in our bedroom, and someone else is shitting on our toilet, like that night we were coked up, and my husband’s hair was still short and we were leaving his office’s Christmas Party at Cipriani’s, the beautiful one, the one down on Wall Street.

“God, this is really it,” he had said. “This is what freedom feels like.”

I thought so too. The city looked so beautiful, so iconic.

And then he had said, “I lost my job

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baby. But don't worry. I'll get back in. I'll get back in."

"I wanna get back in," I whisper aloud, as we wander through the gaudy merchandise, the candy, the candy toys, the candy apples, the stuffed animals, the Halloween decorations, the Christmas decorations, on our way out of Cracker Barrel.

A friend texts from Paris: *regarde le ciel*, consoling me with the trite concept that whether you're in Terre Haute, Indiana, or Montmartre, France, the sky is the sky is the sky. This just makes me want a cigarette. Gas is down to \$3.69 again. We fuck in a Motel 6, while the toddler sleeps but I can't cum cuz of the moan of the highway, all those truckers driving all night long to bring us our Charmin toilet paper, our Nestle drinking water. Why do I feel so much sadder in Springfield, Missouri, than I do in Brooklyn? Am I really a bigger failure here than I am dodging days' worth of uncollected trash with the stroller down Fulton Street?

For solace, I text all of my friends who have left the city, and they all say the same thing: You'll soon be relieved. They go on about how relieved they are. They sound like ex-smokers. But I'll always be a smoker. Besides, we didn't leave because we wanted to.

"Do you think we'll go back eventually?" I ask my husband as we drive through the Ozarks, where the clouds have collapsed into the hills, and the hills are a vision in green, but then we leave the Ozarks behind and the landscape becomes forsaken again. I take a picture of the dusk falling over a British Petroleum station.

"After what happened?" he asks. "How could you want to?"

"What happened there could have happened anywhere," I say. It's the same old argument. Wherever you run to, there you are. Besides, sometimes I'm not even sure what happened. We talked about leaving. Rather than finding work, we worried over the rent and talked about leaving some more. And then, somehow, we had only one month's rent left. Our apartment was suddenly empty, and when I looked out the window, all of our beloved furniture was on the curb.

"She dreams the way you dreamt, and I dreamt, of getting out of her shithole town that's so much prettier than she can see."

"Don't you think you need to start over?" my husband asks.

"Me start over? What about you start over?" I ask.

"Don't do that. Answer a question with a question," he says.

What happens at some point in Oklahoma is that the sky opens up and the West begins. There is no warning sign, no marker in the road. Suddenly, the earth feels so small beneath what's above. The billboards grow less persistent, and so do the churches. A sad old man runs a motel with his bulldog. He collects the dirty sheets on a golf cart, the rooms are rife with nostalgia and crickets. The café in town advertises the best chicken fry in the West.

The waitress has magenta hair and a country voice, is a student at Hinton High, and she doesn't fuss over my daughter at all, cuz she's dreaming of New York, not kids. "Oh my god," she says, "I wanna go there so, so bad." She dreams the way you dreamt, and I dreamt, of getting out of her shithole town that's so much prettier than she can see. What can I tell her about all that as she serves us the best chicken fry I've ever had, the gravy voluptuous, the side of corn a little too sweet, the sunset, through the diner window, almost religious—what can I tell her about New York that won't break her heart?

I say, "Good luck!" and leave her a tip we can't afford.

The next day we drive on and from Oklahoma there is nothing for the earth to do but lose all its green. This is where the aliens love most. The desert is more beautiful than everything preceding it, but so much more depressing, all those untiring shrubs trying to thrive in a soil that desires only death. I'm still thinking of the waitress with magenta hair, because she reminds me of another girl with blue tresses, delivering pizzas stoned, counting the days until she had saved enough money for her very first flight to New York City—the flight I never returned from.

"It feels better out here," I lie to my husband.

"This is what Americans have always felt when they went west," he says.

"What's that?" I ask.

"Freedom."

What's terrifying to me is that he looks so happy when he says it. He always looks too happy when he meditates on freedom. Hasn't he learned by now, it doesn't exist? I press my hand against the glass of Rhiannon. The sun is suddenly so overbearing, all over me, even though the windows are all closed.

"Why'd you go to New York in the first place?" I ask.

"I was running away," he says. "I ran away to New York."

And I realize it's true. I ran away there, too. We all were runaways, everyone who ever came to New York. I'm suddenly weeping. And my husband doesn't say anything, just takes my hand.

"It doesn't matter what happened back there. You're a real artist," he says. "You don't need New York."

But what if I do? There isn't a sign in the road that signals the beginning or end of the West, but there is a red ridge rising out of the state of New Mexico, beyond which all rainfall flows into the Pacific. At the Continental Divide is a museum, and our daughter is screaming for ice cream, and a tightness rises in my chest, a feeling about time—a rage at its forward-moving linearity—about how I'll never get New York back, but really about how I'll never get back those years when I was childless and drunk

and way too young to concern myself with failure.

What did I do with all that time? What I did was talk a lot about being an artist with a lot of other people who talked about being artists rather than make art. And when I finally made something, something I believed was true and beautiful, no one cared. Sentimental, the only review called it.

“Chiara,” my husband shouts. I realize he’s been standing right outside Rhiannon with our daughter, and where have I been? Lost in time and space. He motions for me to roll down the window and gestures behind him. “This family ... this man lost his wallet.”

Pulled up beside us in this deserted museum parking lot, where the rainfall parts ways to either the Atlantic or Pacific, in a station wagon, older, and sadder, and more beaten up than ours, is a family: a man, a woman, and a little girl with pigtails, sucking on a pacifier. “They need some money for gas,” my husband says. “The man, he lost his wallet.”

The man holds up a string of jewels, gold colored, but not gold. “You like pretty things?” He smiles, bearing a mouthful of missing teeth. “Anything you like. You just give us cash for the gas.”

We’re gonna just be gypsies for a while, is what I had said to my best friend from art school on the steps of her \$3 million brownstone. Gypsies aren’t called gypsies anymore, you know that right? is what she said in response.

In my purse, I find a 20 and three singles, and I hand my husband the latter.

“Here,” my husband says to the man. “This is all the cash we have plus the 2 I already gave you.”

The Romani man looks at us, bitterly. He had expected more, but he hands my husband the bracelet anyways. “It will give you good fortune. Prosperity,” he says.

“That’s mine!” Our toddler cries, and everyone laughs. A few miles past the divide, she tears it apart, then throws it out the car window into the dust.

Somehow, we’ve made it nearly to Phoenix. Just in time for our approach, the AC fritzes out and my daughter’s face turns crimson even with all the

windows rolled down. We feed her ice chips and speed 20 miles above the limit and nothing we do makes it feel any cooler inside Rhiannon.

Hours pass like this, with the sun imperious and nowhere to stop. Everything is just desert, and desert, and desert, and the haunting cactus which line the mountains are all burnt black from another summer’s fire, and we’re screaming at each other, my husband and I, and our daughter is crying, and I’m afraid we might actually die. I’m castigating him for never getting back in, calling him an impotent, feckless man and he’s blaming me for wasting all his money on better paintbrushes to make up for a “void of vision.” He’s never said anything like that before, he’s always called me a real artist, a true artist, he’s always been the only one to believe in me, and we’re fighting for so long, we hardly notice dusk fall, and that suddenly there is a breeze, and that our daughter’s face has returned to its normal hue. If we were to stop, and I were to have a canvas before me, I might aspire to capture a palette such as this, a rendering of twilight more beautiful than I have ever, ever seen. And I wonder, who can keep a record of all this beauty?

No painting, no photograph is a sufficient antidote to all our suffering, the unassailable fact of our ending, and what is a memory but a scrap of sand on the wild, transient beach.

So, we don’t stop there.

Los Angeles finally appears on the green highway signs once Phoenix is behind us. It ignites in me something electric, like the way I used to feel on those New York nights having conquered all the other women in black, and we emerged together, my future husband and I, from some metallic bathroom, high, falsely prosperous, having just made love. I won’t ever sever this cord I have to calamitous romance.

“Let’s just try it,” I plead.

“Do you know that gas there is up to \$7 a gallon?” he asks. I ignore him.

Just before the border to California, still, endlessly in the desert, we stop at last for the night. The receptionist at the La Quinta Inn vows to us that one day he will be so rich, he’ll buy a penthouse

overlooking all of Manhattan. We say nothing. We say, “Good luck!”

My daughter has trouble falling sleep because of the heat, because of us, and so I sing to her as I haven’t since she was an infant. Apparently, there is only one tune I know by heart and so I hum it over and over again. It takes me a minute to realize it is “Amazing Grace.” There is a tap tap tap at the windows as her eyes finally close: the gentleness of rain. Just outside of our room, my husband paces on the sidewalk with a cigarette. When I join him, for the first time in a long time, he draws me in to him and we just hug. The rain ends, it ends so soon in the desert, and it’s a sin, because it doesn’t smell this good anywhere else.

“OK. We’ll go to California,” he says. “Let’s get it out of our system.”

We leave the La Quinta before dawn because we must evade the desert sun and soon afterward, we pass the California state sign, blue with golden flowers, the *copas de ora*. But I don’t see any cups of gold, only more desert. And in this desert, even the shrubs and saguaro fall away. I think of New York, its aroma of trash, its traffic lights bending to the invisible Atlantic’s wind, its mad soundscape. As the desert morning blasts in through Rhiannon, I think of my last vision of the city—that day, only days ago, when we left by way of the Lincoln Tunnel and by happenstance, passed by the westside studio of an old friend, the one who died of an overdose, the one who had risen to great success in his 20s and fallen from glory by 35. So young, so young, the one I loved, and had wanted to be, and then very quickly, didn’t want to be. It was still graffitied on his studio door, the tag-line: *I love my life*. I know it’s still there: my sick, darling city.

“Lost Angeles,” my daughter says, as we sit in traffic at the edge of Los Angeles’ city limits. The desert has changed

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here, the hills are golden, it's true, and dressed in trees. It's pretty, it's prettier than I ever thought it would be, and I feel good. But the famous traffic goes on and on, and with the windows open, we feel sick, not from the heat, but from the smog. Hours pass like this. Our daughter cries, we bicker, we reconcile, and then at last, the highway abruptly announces its end. We can smell the ocean. After parking Rhiannon, we emerge at the end of the road. But we still can't see it because on the boardwalk, there is a camp and it stretches this way and that, and so instead of the Pacific, our view is of a city of blue tents, all that remains for so many lost angels.

"Where's Hollywood?" our daughter asks. We spin round and round, scouring the hills, but can't find the sign anywhere to show to her.

"What happened?" I ask my husband. "I mean what really happened?"

I return again to our last day in New York, when Rhiannon was finally packed and parked on the block outside of our now, former apartment, when our neighbor, the one whose last name we never knew despite having seen each other daily for a decade, peeked inside the car, and just said, "All right." Everything we owned, everything we own, piled around us. Then she hugged me. "Turn your head to the left so you can feel my

heart." And I did not hesitate, and I did feel it, her heartbeat against my chest. "See you when you get back home," she said, releasing me. And I turned away, because I didn't want her to see me sob, realizing I would never see her again.

"Did we run away?" I ask my husband. "Did we run away from home?"

"Come on," he says. Our daughter is up on his shoulders. "Let's go see what we came all the way here for."

"Ocean!" she cries. "There it is!"

And there it is, how sweet the sound. ■

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COMMUNITY

The Crease in My Kippah

How a truly terrible Hebrew school student grew up to become an Orthodox rabbi

BY HAYIM LEITER

As I sat on my synagogue's bimah wearing a standard-issue black satin kippah, I felt an awkward sense of relief. After 10 years of Hebrew school, our class had just led Shabbat services to cap off our confirmation.

The rabbi then ascended the pulpit to address the congregation. "Ladies and gentlemen, let me tell you," he said, "this is by far the *worst* confirmation class in Adath Jeshuren's history."

In the rabbi's defense, it was probably true. And to make matters worse, it was mostly my fault.

In many ways, I grew up in a classic Conservative family. I went to public school and attended after-school Judaic learning. We had Shabbat dinners and kept kosher—at home. But as I made my

way through Hebrew school, I became more and more disenchanted with Judaism. I was a surfer and a skate rat and a bit of a troublemaker.

In those days, board sports were everything to me. If I had been left to my own devices, I would have been riding something all day long. These sports epitomized free expression for me—and Judaism was the exact opposite. Ritual practice felt like a set of rules to a game that I didn't want to play. It was something only people my parents' age did, and I couldn't figure out why. Although I went through the motions of attending Hebrew school, I only did so because my parents required it. When I finally arrived at confirmation, I was so glad to have "done my time" that I didn't set foot in a synagogue for the next two years.

The Holocaust unit was the only subject in Hebrew school that had caught my attention. I can remember my mother mentioning it every so often the summer before I first encountered the topic in middle school. I wasn't sure why she did this but it felt like a coming of age—dealing with such sensitive material. As it was for many other American Jews, the Holocaust became the cornerstone of my Jewish identity, and it stayed in my mind even after I stopped going to Hebrew school and synagogue altogether. I was proud of my heritage and I was ready to fight antisemitism in all its forms, even though I never personally encountered it.

In my senior year of high school, two years after my confirmation, I participated in the March of the Living, a two-week program touring concentration camps in Poland and then traveling to Israel. To actually be where so many of our people were systematically slaughtered put many things into perspective for me. The trip not only set my moral compass but also made me question my assumptions about ritual practice.

On the march, I met the person who would become my closest friend. Akiva and I hit it off right away despite religious differences; he was Orthodox and I was a lapsed Conservative Jew, at best. But it made no difference. I like to say that because of our friendship, I

became observant and Akiva became a surfer.

Our first stop in Israel was Tiberias, where Akiva asked me to join the minyan for morning prayers. I agreed, even though at the time I wasn't keen on waking up early for much of anything. We congregated overlooking a breathtaking view of the hills around the Sea of Galilee. It was an awe-inspiring scene. As the participants began to mumble and sway, I waited for someone to announce the page number; it never happened. I imitated the people around me in the hope that no one would recognize my ignorance. I felt ashamed of this lack in myself and was certain that everyone would soon figure me out.

That moment on the hills of Tiberias awakened something in me. Maybe it was the surroundings. Maybe it was because it was my first visit to Israel. Or maybe it was because it was my first time seeing people my age voluntarily participating in Jewish observance. Whatever it was, all I knew then was that I wanted to do what they were doing.

While on Ben Yehuda Street in central Jerusalem, I purchased my first kippah. This shouldn't have been such a significant event. I had always worn one when eating dinner in my parents' home and when attending synagogue. But they were always the black satin type with a significant crease down the middle. They lived in the kitchen cabinet above the telephone in our house—and were only worn inside. The one I purchased in Jerusalem was knitted, perfectly flat—and it was mine.

When I stepped out onto Ben Yehuda, wearing it for the first time, I was nervous and jittery. I felt like I was outing myself as a Jew—a peculiar sensation to have while walking the streets of the Jewish state. But my direct exposure to Jewish suffering and observant living taught me how privileged I was to be free to practice

“I tried being everything from a stand-up comedian to a radio disc jockey to a professional surfer, but nothing seemed to fit.”

my religion. The least I could do was not take it for granted.

When we returned home from the trip, I came off the bus wearing my kippah and dancing the hora with my new group of friends. Needless to say, because of my checkered past, my parents were—to say the least—surprised.

But despite this new connection to Judaism, I feared how people would look at me if I displayed my religiosity in such an overt manner. It was one thing to wear a kippah when surrounded by others doing the same thing; but the world I lived in and the environment I would be moving on to at college were something else. No one in my high school wore a kippah and the University of Rhode Island, where I'd start my undergraduate degree that fall, had no Orthodox presence whatsoever. This thought made me so uneasy that on the ride home from the bus, I folded my kippah into my pocket, creasing it for the first time.

The University of Rhode Island didn't have much of a Jewish population. The vast majority of the Jewish students were aligned with the fraternity and sorority systems, which I wanted nothing to do with. It took some time, but once I found my footing on campus, I began frequenting the Hillel, along with other student organizations. I spent many Friday nights

walking to and from Hillel with my kippah folded in my pocket.

Despite the fact that I wasn't hiding my Judaism, I still didn't feel like I could display my religious self for all to see. My identity was split in two: There was my public persona of being involved in many different campus organizations and my Jewish side that came alive at Hillel—when I was indoors.

Throughout college, I wasn't sure what my career path should be. I tried being everything from a stand-up comedian to a radio disc jockey to a professional surfer, but nothing seemed to fit.

In the hope of getting some guidance, I filled out a computer questionnaire at career services. I answered in the affirmative to such questions as, “Do you like speaking in front of a group?” and “Do you want to be a leader?” The computer's top suggestion was “clergyperson.”

I couldn't believe what I was reading—a rabbi? Really? There must have been something wrong with the program. I felt like I knew so little about Jewish ritual and practice that I could not take on such a public role. Still, the idea, much like my experience in Tiberias, continued nagging at me until my senior year.

For the second half of my college career, I volunteered, along with my close friend Mike, to be Rhody the Ram, the University of Rhode Island's mascot. (We took turns wearing the costume.) The night of Midnight Madness during my senior year was the start of something new. For the first time, the men's and women's teams would be practicing together.

In honor of this joint practice, Mike and I organized a skit. As we completed our preparations the night prior, Mike mentioned that he was going out with his friend Fitz on his way to the event. He assured me he would arrive on time.

On their way to Midnight Madness, Fitz took a corner too fast and wrapped the car around a tree. Mike, who walked away with cuts and bruises, didn't make it to Midnight Madness. Fitz never made it anywhere again.

The following week was a bit of a blur. It was Homecoming, and I was to be crowned Homecoming King at the football game. As it turned out, the



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game and Fitz's funeral overlapped. I chose to travel to Massachusetts to pay my respects and be there for Mike.

I never had the chance to get to know Fitz. We were only acquaintances through Mike. But at the funeral, the eulogies made clear to me the depth of what we had lost. In his short time on earth, Fitz had already done missionary work around the world through his Catholic Church. If things had been different, he may have become a clergyperson himself. I was deeply saddened to see someone with such promise cut down way before his prime.

As the memorial was winding to a close, Father John Soares, the head of the URI Catholic Center, rose to speak. "I have a lot of faith in the student body today because the Homecoming King, who's meant to be crowned right now, is here to pay his respects." I was overcome with emotion, feeling partially honored that Father John would make this pronouncement—and partially embarrassed that my actions were on display for all to see.

That week taught me more about who I should be and what I should do than at any other point in my life. Fitz taught me that good can be done even in a short amount of time. It still pains me to know that his impact ended so soon.

Father John taught me the importance of being an example for the good you want to see in the world. He showed me that if I genuinely cared about the Jewish people and their future, my impact would be greater if done openly. But beyond that, he helped me understand that Judaism needs to be more than just reactive. It's not enough to simply defy those who oppose us, I needed to build a positive expression of Jewish living and that meant incorporating Jewish tradition into my daily life. I had to become a rabbi.

I applied to the Jewish Theological Seminary. I had always been a Conservative Jew, so it seemed the logical choice. But my time at JTS was short-lived because I didn't fit in. I wanted to learn and observe Jewish law in a traditional way and, at the time, JTS

resembled a graduate school program. Much to my dismay, I realized that the Conservative movement could no longer provide for my religious needs. I left for the Orthodox world.

The move scared me. Thankfully, my parents have always been open and supportive, from my surfing antics to my religious tendencies. But my move would likely lead them to places they might never have gone otherwise. And I feared my religious observance and the rigidity of Orthodoxy could create tension between us.

Luckily, as my time at JTS was coming to a close, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, a left-leaning modern Orthodox rabbinical school, was in its infancy. YCT provided me with a safe space to question the larger issues of living a traditional life in the modern world.

Ultimately, my studies led me to the place I now call home: Israel. Here I completed my rabbinic education at Yishevat HaMivtar in Efrat while concurrently learning to be a mohel. It's as if that first *shacharit* in Tiberias planted a seed in me of not only the Jew I would become but of where I would one day live.

Akiva and I remained close throughout the years. Our rabbinic learning even overlapped for a year at YCT. A few months ago, he made aliyah with his family and moved to the first floor of my building. It's hard to explain the feeling of watching our children become friends. We spend many mornings praying together in the Judean hills but we also spend mornings surfing along the Mediterranean coast.

A lot has happened along my Jewish journey. My rabbinical search has been influenced by many other friends and leaders throughout the years. But as crazy as it may sound, I believe I have Fitz and Father John to thank for helping start me on the path. It is because of their inspiration—and Akiva, who originally set me on my way—that there is no longer a crease in my kippah, because I never feel the need to hide it in my pocket anymore. ■

This article was originally published on February 6, 2023.



Album of the Week

on4word, *In Rainbow Roads*

In Rainbow Roads is an online mashup album by somebody who goes by the name "on4word." I have no idea who they are. However, something compelled them to intricately recreate the sounds of the Radiohead album *In Rainbows* through the medium of the 1996 video game *Super Mario 64*.

Listeners of a certain age (millennials) will remember being flooded with mashups and remixes all based around some pun, the godfather being Danger Mouse's 2004 *Grey Album*, which took the vocals of Jay-Z's *Black Album* and made beats out of The Beatles' *White Album*. Get it? At the time, listening to *The Grey Album*, which sparked a whirlwind of legal commentary about the internet and the future of copyright, felt like being offered a glimpse into a whole new world of music.

That both was and wasn't true, as was the case for so many digital promises of the aughts. Mashups and remixes soon became common, occasionally with artist co-signs. But the fad came and went. The music wasn't good enough, no matter how clever the pun.

In Rainbow Roads, on the other hand, is completely delightful.

—David Meir Grossman

Bialys

BY MARCIA FRIEDMAN

INGREDIENTS

- Extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 envelopes (1/4 ounce each) active dry yeast**
- 2 cups very warm water (105 to 110 degrees)**
- 1 teaspoon sugar**
- 6 to 7 cups bread flour, plus extra for the work surface**
- 1½ tablespoons kosher salt, plus additional for onion topping and sprinkling**
- 3 tablespoons dried minced onion**
- 1 egg yolk mixed with 1 tablespoon cold water**
- 1 tablespoon poppy seeds (optional)**

PREPARATION

Step 1

Coat a large bowl with olive oil and set aside.

Step 2

Dissolve the yeast in the warm water in a separate bowl, about 5 minutes. Add the sugar. Stir in about 5 1/2 cups of the flour and 1 1/2 tablespoons kosher salt. Continue adding flour until the dough holds together. Transfer to a floured board, and knead for about 10 minutes, until smooth (the dough will be very dense). Form into a ball.

Step 3

Place the dough in the oiled bowl, then remove it, turn it over, and place it (oiled side up) back in the bowl. Cover with plastic wrap and let rise until doubled, about 2 hours.

Step 4

Uncover dough and press down the middle to deflate. Divide the dough into 16 equal pieces and roll into balls. Place on a lightly floured or parchment-lined surface, cover with oiled plastic wrap, and let rise until nearly doubled (about 1 1/2 to 2 hours).

Step 5

Prepare the onion topping by placing the dried onion in a small dish and covering with 1/2 cup very warm water. Let stand for at least 15 minutes. Drain any excess water, and toss with 1/2 tablespoon olive oil and 1/2 teaspoon kosher salt.

Step 6

Adjust the oven rack to the second-to-top position, and place a baking stone or a baking sheet on the rack. Preheat the oven to 475 degrees. Cut a piece of parchment paper roughly the size of the stone or pan and set aside on the counter.

Step 7

Take one ball of dough (keeping the rest covered), and flatten on a lightly floured surface. Stretch with fingers to 4 to 5 inches in diameter. Gently pull the center and then press very firmly with thumbs until the dough holds a thin, 2-inch-wide indent (the thinner the indent, the more likely it will keep its shape during baking). The bialy will look somewhat flat, but the edges will puff up during baking.

Step 8

Place on the parchment, and brush with egg yolk mixture, sprinkle lightly with kosher salt, fill indent with about 1/2 to 1 teaspoon of the onion mixture, and sprinkle all over with poppy seeds if using. Repeat with remaining balls.

Step 9

When the parchment is full of shaped bialys, slide it directly onto the hot stone or baking sheet in the oven, and bake until bialys are lightly browned, 9 to 12 minutes. Remove to a wire rack. Repeat with remaining batches.

Step 10

Serve warm or at room temperature with butter or cream cheese.

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