

THE TAB

CONTENTS

Vol. 2 Issue 12

- 1 **Failed Unions**
Arab Americans were the test cases for mass surveillance and we let it happen
- 6 **How the Bank Collapse Goes Nuclear**
This isn't a Silicon Valley problem, it's a global debt crisis
- 9 **Literary Phenom Flames Out**
Aleksandar Hemon's new novel is a tedious progressive frog march through the horrors of the 20th century
- 10 **Indonesia's Jews Come Out**
In the world's most populous Muslim country, a new generation of Jews strives for visibility
- 13 **The Future of Jewish South Africa**
Different visions of the community's place in the 'Rainbow Nation'
- 15 **Orthodox High School Musical**
For observant students in all-girls schools, theatrical productions are a long-standing tradition
- 19 **A Visit With Raphael Mechoulam, the Israeli Godfather of Cannabinoid Research**
The scientist, who died this week at age 92, studied the beneficial effects of cannabis

T MORE TABLET



Point your smart phone camera at the QR code to visit Tablet's front page.

NEWS

Failed Unions

Arab Americans were the test cases for mass surveillance and we let it happen

BY JUSTINE EL-KHAZEN

My husband began having panic attacks. He'd pull on his orange puffer jacket, heart flailing in his chest, and walk into Prospect Park, alone in the middle of the night. I knew this wasn't normal, but I figured his anxiety could be traced to the Lebanese Civil War, which began in 1975, when he was 2, and ended in 1990 when he was 18.

The war still gave him nightmares. Men in balaclavas had banged down the door to his family's apartment with the butts of their guns. They'd come to drive the family out of Christian East Beirut. Some minor offense had been committed. When the family was finally settled again, my husband began weapons training in case another militia came for them in the night. He was 8.

It was easy to blame everything on the war. The war was a time bomb ticking in my husband's heart. The war was why he woke up screaming. The war was the reason he couldn't catch his breath.

After 9/11, NYPD detectives began knocking on our door, their guns holstered, but no less real. I answered it, once in a bath towel, but I didn't see the connection. I'd gotten my wars mixed up. America had become the nightmare, when it was supposed to have been the dream.

In the spring of 2003, immigrants like my husband were called in to local field offices of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) so that special agents could fingerprint them, photograph them, gather their financial information and conduct biographical interviews. This process was known as "special" registration—"special" because it only applied to men from Muslim countries. All across the country, male immigrants from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Syria, Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Eritrea, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Somalia, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Jordan, and Kuwait were forced to register at their local INS field offices. Once their data had been collected, it was entered into the database Congress had called for in the Patriot Act, the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System, or NSEERS. In a matter of months, it housed the data of 138,000 men. My husband was one of them.

When I drove my husband to register, I assumed it was a formality. The immigration system was in chaos after 9/11, so when the Department of Justice ordered all male immigrants from Muslim-majority countries to register, my husband and I weren't overly alarmed. The articles we read in the paper suggested that the purpose of registration was to catch visa "overstayers." We were

ALSO IN TABLET THIS WEEK

Israel's Genius, and Its Bad Shepherds

The Jewish state is an idea, which is why it will survive its present crisis

BY BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY

The Hollow Return of American Manufacturing

American factories might come back but the middle class won't follow

BY HIRSH CHITKARA

Escape From Mariupol

A Holocaust survivor and her family in hiding and on the run

BY EDWARD SEROTTA

Women Holding Things

An interview with author and artist Maira Kalman

BY FRANCES BRENT

Happy Erev Birthday

Why my family starts celebrating the night before

BY COURTNEY HAZLETT

The Joys of Garlic

It's delicious, it's good for you, and even the Talmud recommends adding it to your diet

BY PAOLA GAVIN



assiduous about our green card paperwork, even paying lawyers we couldn't afford to make sure it was all done correctly. And besides, even if there was something sinister about forcing all Muslim immigrants to report to the government, my husband was Catholic, from one of the oldest Maronite families in Lebanon. Whatever was happening surely didn't apply to us.

What we didn't know was that catching people overstaying their visas wasn't the true endgame of registration. The

real aim was to place immigrants from Muslim countries under permanent government watch. In passing the Patriot Act, Congress told the INS to take a data management system developed to stop Mexican smugglers and use it to track men from Muslim countries. But their data would need to be gathered first. That was why the Bush administration ordered men like my husband to register.

We were married a hundred days after 9/11. The fires at Ground Zero were still burning when we recited our vows.

We'd met on Sept. 12, at a diner in Brooklyn where I worked. My husband stopped in the middle of the dining room floor and stared at me. He actually pulled his sunglasses down over the bridge of his nose to get a better look. I stared back. By the end of the week, I'd told my roommate I was going to marry him.

On the day we were married, we took a car to Borough Hall in the rain. I was 22, unsure of everything, unable to explain why I was crying as I watched the gray blur of Brooklyn go by. "What if we have a sick baby?" I blurted out. My husband laughed. "Then we'll love him," he said.

He had dreamed of coming to America ever since he discovered a "Pat the Patriot" beach towel at a sundries shop in Cyprus. The Patriots' famous mascot was crouched over a football in red, white, and blue, looking tough. That was all it took. He'd heard the words "New England" and known: This was the new world, where none of the old antagonisms applied, a perfect negative image of his own country, which had been torn apart by a war that stretched back millennia.

But now we lived in a country that was waging its own "crusade," as George W. Bush called the war on terror. What did that mean for us? The sick baby was just a proxy for everything I couldn't say. A year after our wedding, as I drove my husband to register, I was quiet and so was he.

The lawyers we couldn't afford admonished me: Wait, watch. If it seemed like most of the men who'd entered that morning were exiting, and my husband wasn't among them, call.

I did wait, 16 hours. When I finally saw him shambling out—stiff from a day spent sitting on the floor without access to food, water or phones—I knew better than to ask.

The news coverage of registration was paltry and missed the bigger story, which was about the state funneling people into databases in a new age of mass surveillance. As the Department of Homeland Security's Robert Moczny put it in 2022: Your ability to hunt terrorists is "only as good as the number of names you have in your database." Moczny was head of the Office of Biometric Identity Management at DHS following 9/11; his office administered the United States Visitor and Immigrant Status Indicator Technology Program (US-VISIT). US-VISIT was the replacement for—and at some level the rival of—NSEERS.

NSEERS was developed by John Ashcroft's Department of Justice during President George W. Bush's first term. As with so much after 9/11, the executive branch began exercising greater authority in areas it hadn't previously, which meant that as far as entry-exit systems went, there were rival systems in development, and rival philosophies. Moczny called NSEERS counterproductive to the bigger goal of tracking who came and went at the border. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge agreed, so before US-VISIT was debuted in 2007 he hired a public relations company to sell it around the world. Americans may not have been paying attention to the technology being deployed at their borders, but everyone else was. NSEERS carried bad overtones. Moczny told me there were those within INS who felt it had placed "yellow crescents on the shoulders of Muslim males."

The ACLU agreed. In 2011, it called NSEERS "ethnic profiling on a scale not seen since Japanese-American internment during World War II." But it wasn't just a question of scale. The legal framework upon which "special" registration and NSEERS were built came from legislation that was written in the wake of WWII. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 allowed the attorney general (AG) to force immigrants to

register with the government and provide personal and biometric data when they did. It also gave the AG the power to share that information with local and federal law enforcement. These policies were a palatable alternative to internment: no need to intern people if you could track them.

So while “special” registration and NSEERS seemed to be in line with the Patriot Act, their legal basis had been established 50 years earlier. The person at the DOJ to make this historical connection was Kris Kobach, who served as counsel to the attorney general. Kobach would go on to become Kansas secretary of state—and a member of Donald Trump’s transition team. Interagency cooperation at the border is Kobach’s issue. He sees immigration, and immigration enforcement, as being within the scope of states’ rights. NSEERS, which gave federal and local law enforcement access to the data of immigrants, was his first stab at this vision.

From the campaign trail in 2015, presidential candidate Donald Trump pledged to implement a Muslim database and was immediately compared to a Nazi, his vagueness on this point cast in absolute terms. So the maelstrom began. In 12 years, the *Times* wrote 32 articles about a real Muslim registry, and in one year, it churned out 84 articles about Trump’s maybe-kind-of-sorta idea for one.

Trump’s campaign promise of a Muslim database wasn’t as wildly “unprecedented” (to borrow a word overused at the time) as it seemed. Indeed according to Kobach, who surely helped Trump develop his idea for the Muslim database, Trump’s plan was simply to bring NSEERS and “special” registration back. This fact was completely lost on the media.

Even if their objection to special registry came 13 years too late, Americans were right to see something nefarious in Trump’s promises. The information gathered from my husband on the day he registered was entered into two separate data management systems: the Automated Biometric Identification System (IDENT), which consolidated biometric data, and the Arrival and Departure System, ADIS, which

“In the years after registration, my husband and I were investigated by ICE, the CIA, and the NYPD. Detectives from NYPD’s Counterterrorism Bureau all but banged down our door one morning.”

consolidated biographical data. As time went on, the data gathered during registration was incorporated into other systems. My husband’s data is currently housed in at least five subsequent systems. This is what it means for the government to amass data at such a scale: Once logged, it never dies.

Polling suggests that as long as data collection helps stop terrorists, half of Americans are OK with it. This polling seems to assume that the data is going to be used appropriately, let alone effectively. But “special” registration didn’t result in a single terror conviction. Not one. Our privacy—and the privacy of 138,000 other families—was violated for nothing.

Part of the reason my husband and I didn’t understand what “special” registration would mean for us is because the media virtually ignored it. Even when references were made to the fact that this system was being used to track and investigate immigrants—rather than enforce immigration law—they were attributed to sources and couched in equivocal language: “critics complained that NSEERS is suspect because it seems to track Middle Eastern and South Asian immigrants almost exclusively.”

This cannot come as much of a

surprise. The distance the press is supposed to keep from the institutions it covers died a quick, unequivocal death after 9/11. On more than one occasion, America’s media establishment treated the content of a White House press briefing as news to publish, rather than information to scrutinize.

That changed under Trump. The reporting was, if nothing else, less coy. Just a few days after he was elected, I read an article in Reuters about his next moves. It turned out his call for a Muslim database would be easy enough to realize. The plan was to use what was already there: NSEERS, the Muslim database built back in 2002.

In the years after registration, my husband and I were investigated by ICE, the CIA, and the NYPD. Detectives from NYPD’s Counterterrorism Bureau all but banged down our door one morning; and they had all gotten my husband’s name, and whatever else they had on him, from NSEERS. Once his data had been entered into it, it gave any government agency with a paranoid streak access to us. And they all had paranoid streaks after 9/11, the biggest national security failure in U.S. history. The FBI, the CIA, and the INS had all failed to “connect the dots,” in the words of Congress’ 9/11 Commission. Connecting the dots would be the priority going forward. If every agency—local and federal—had access to the same leads, terrorists would never slip through the cracks again. This was the thinking after 9/11, and it left my husband and me open to an endless round of investigations.

The investigations were unsettling. We were told by an INS agent that our case had been taken over by ICE, and then the CIA, which made us wonder about our privacy. Was email safe? Our cellphones? Could we speak inside our apartment, or should we take a walk if we needed to discuss something private? *A man who doesn’t lose his reason over certain things can have no reason to lose*, Sigmund Freud wrote of paranoia in 1895. Years later, when Edward Snowden leaked that the NSA collected the metadata of American citizens, I shrugged; I’d

known something to that effect was happening all along.

But even I was dumbfounded when, in October 2005, two detectives from the NYPD Counterterrorism Bureau turned up at our home. I was in the shower when I heard a knock so forceful it rattled our door on its hinges. I threw on a towel and ran to it to find two middle-aged women in pantsuits standing on our landing.

“Battin’ a thousand,” one laughed as she glanced at the other.

Her partner looked at me: “We have your husband in custody,” she said, then flashed a badge.

They asked about our finances, which were pretty pathetic. We’d put most of our payments to our immigration lawyers on credit cards, so we were always being harassed by creditors about debts we had no hope of repaying. It’s hard for me to imagine that in the great edifice of data the INS built in the spring of 2003 these facts were not on file. But I answered their questions anyway. Then I answered the ones about my husband’s recent visit to his mother in Beirut. I explained his recent trip to Nashville to record an album with some singer-songwriter he’d met through friends. What terrorist goes to Nashville? I thought. But the obviousness of the situation—the grad student and musician up to their ears in debt, living in a fall-down apartment and making occasional trips to Music City—seemed lost on them.

A day later, a chill went up my spine when I saw issues of the *New York Daily News* in my local bodega, with a headline that read: “SUBWAY TERROR: BOMBS IN STROLLERS.” *‘Specific threat’ triggers massive NYPD mobilization*, read the tagline.

The situation suddenly became clear: In the little time the NYPD had before the media broke the story, they decided to visit my husband and me.

“What I want to know,” our lawyer said when I called him, “is why your husband is on a short list of terror suspects that the NYPD has.” I wanted to know too.

So I asked—at an INS interview the following week. The agent interviewing us that day, a young woman with a long,

“‘What I want to know,’ our lawyer asked when I called him, ‘is why your husband is on a short list of terror suspects that the NYPD has.’ I wanted to know too.”

curly ponytail and acne on her cheeks, turned tomato red.

“ARE YOU NOW OR HAVE YOU EVER BEEN A TERRORIST?” she screamed.

“No,” I said after a long pause. This turn of events—you ask an agent of the state a simple question, and she accuses you of being a terrorist—didn’t figure in my idea of America. Was this now the kind of country where you might be presumed guilty simply on the basis of your last name? I was beginning to see that it was, and that it wasn’t some magical alternative to Lebanon: There were endless wars and people with guns at the door here too.

Long before the cops banged down our door that morning in October of 2005, attitudes toward the war had begun to shift. Press outlets that had formerly been rah-rah for the 2003 invasion of Iraq scrambled to condemn the photos leaked from Abu Ghraib. George W. Bush’s Attorney General John Ashcroft, laid up in a hospital with acute pancreatitis, roused himself sufficiently to refuse to reauthorize the president’s surveillance program. And the Justice Department, of all agencies, commissioned a study by the Vera Institute on community relations between law enforcement and Arab Americans after 9/11.

The study found what you’d expect: Arab Americans feared their government much more than they did their fellow citizens. A lot was made of hate crimes after the attacks. Dumb Americans terrorizing people who “looked Muslim.” But it was their government Arab Americans feared most. When asked why, they reported that fears related to immigration, racial profiling, the Patriot Act, detentions and deportations and “special” registration itself all outweighed their fear of hate crimes.

Interestingly, the study limited its focus to the perceptions and experiences of Arab Americans—rather than all Muslims—in order to allow for a deeper understanding of the impact on one group, and as the writers point out, two-thirds of Arab Americans are Christian. So ICE, the FBI, the CIA, all the agencies that investigated Arab Americans during those years were looking primarily at Christians, when the goal was to stop jihadist terrorist attacks.

In all our interviews at the INS, we encountered one sympathetic agent. She had an Arab last name, smiled at us immediately, and worked at the INS field office in Jamaica, Queens.

“People who come to see me are usually pretty frustrated,” she said when I asked when this process of interviewing us every few months would end. My husband and I had been married five years by that point; we’d been dealing with his citizenship case the whole time. “I’m sorry,” she went on. “All I can see here is that your case was taken over by ICE a while back. I know someone there. I can arrange an interview with him, if you like.”

A few weeks later, we found ourselves in an unmarked building in downtown Manhattan. “Look,” said our interviewer, who had a husky, red face and muscles bulging under his suit. “There’s not a lot I can tell you. Your files were requisitioned by the CIA a few months ago. That’s all I know.”

A man who does not lose his reason over certain things can have no reason to lose. I dropped out of graduate school. My husband went for night rambles. I began sleeping all the time. The crusade had come for us in the

end. I couldn't stand to think about it so I slept.

For my husband, it was different. America had been the dream that helped him survive the Lebanese Civil War. He had a place to go, a reason not to slip into the war's drugged out aftermath. Would he survive losing the dream he'd held onto for so long? When he told me just a few months after we divorced that he'd had a "small heart attack," I didn't need to ask why. I knew America had broken his heart.

A year and a half after our interview with the ICE agent, my husband's green card application was approved. No reason had been given for its delay, and no reason was given for its approval.

We went out for Greek food when we heard. Octopus legs, lemon potatoes. Greek had always been an emotional touchpoint for us. It was in Cyprus, while living on the Greek side, that my husband had decided to immigrate here. But the miracle had come too late. By then, we'd already begun trying to figure out how to divvy up our life.

The number of people who obtained legal permanent resident status in America dropped precipitously in 2003, the year "special" registration took effect. This is true of immigrants from every country, not just those from countries on the registration list, which suggests that the INS was in disarray that year, unable to process citizenship applications at the rates it had previously. However, immigrants from the rest of the world saw their numbers go back up again immediately, in 2004.

FOLLOW US ON SOCIAL MEDIA

 twitter.com/tabletmag

 [instagram.com/tabletmag](https://www.instagram.com/tabletmag)

 [facebook.com/tabletmag](https://www.facebook.com/tabletmag)

For immigrants from Muslim-majority countries, the decline started earlier, in 2002, when "special" registration was announced, and it lasted longer, not rebounding until 2006.

People died waiting, as one lawyer told me. They fled to Canada. Others simply gave up. There was no grand, precipitating event. We just stopped being able to hold on in the end.

How do facts so essential to our understanding of the war on terror, the longest-running war in American history, get omitted from the public record? If you look at all the reporting from that period—WMDs, the media's unwillingness to take stock of its own systemic failings on that score, the *Times*' bizarre refusal to use the word torture—it's clear the media lost the plot. If the media's ideal is publishing the "first rough draft of history," editors began making compromises with that ideal almost as soon as America was attacked.

But as far as "special" registration went, the media didn't just fail to get the story right; it failed to tell it at all. In fact, I'm not even sure anyone in or outside the media understood that there had already been a Muslim database for nine long years before Trump announced he wanted one. Trump's ideas were never described by reporters as a reprise of what his predecessors had done, but rather as the machinations of the orange Antichrist, thoroughly at odds with the decent America of Bush and Obama.

Under pressure from human rights groups, Obama finally dismantled NSEERS in 2016, just days before Trump took office. The fact that NSEERS actually was a Muslim database was, again, lost on everyone. "We can't risk giving President-elect Trump the tools to create an unconstitutional religious registry," New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman said in urging Obama to remove NSEERS. "We can never allow our nation to return to the dark days of Japanese internment." So much for the first rough draft of history.

Americans still have not come to terms with the underlying aim of programs like NSEERS, which were never just about restricting immigration

or preventing terrorism. In targeting Arab men like my husband, the U.S. government used a vulnerable population to test out the systems of mass surveillance and data collection that would later be routinely applied to all American citizens. That was the real story, but it's one that has barely been told.

It's hard for me not to see every event of my life as having been shaped by the Bush administration's policies and the media's failure to report on them. My husband and I divorced in 2009. I drifted without him. I moved to California, studied poetry. There was a lot of yoga, hikes in the Oakland hills. It was a poor girl's version of *Eat, Pray, Love* without the big payoff at the end. Meanwhile, my ex moved back to Beirut. There were a few good years when the country was stable, but before long Lebanon's economy collapsed due to the stunning graft and corruption of its leadership. It grew poverty-stricken. My ex began telling me he was bartering to eat. The hours during which the electricity worked shrank. We Zoomed by candlelight.

He will always be a refugee now that Lebanon has fallen so spectacularly apart. He tells me he wants to come back, that he wants to "come home." I ask him if he's really sure about that.

"I still love the nation," he recently told me. "I love the people, and what America has given me I don't think anywhere in the world I could have received. I was privileged to have lived in Boston and then have a decade of my life spent in New York, that quality of living and the people around me. It is who I am as much as the (Lebanese Civil) War is. It's the balance. Those 14 years there balanced the war, and that's why I always say America is my home. It's not a country, it's my home, it's my safety, it's my security, it's my growth. It's everything good that I have. Lebanon is the fighter in me, which I love, but America is my home."

The irony is I'm less and less sure it's mine. ■

This article was originally published on March 22, 2023.

How the Bank Collapse Goes Nuclear

This isn't a Silicon Valley problem, it's a global debt crisis

BY ASHLEY RINDSBERG

It should go without saying that we are now in a financial crisis. We have just witnessed the collapse or near-collapse of five banks, including Credit Suisse, an institution of systemic importance. And yet it still needs to be said in light of the glib reaction following the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) earlier this month, which many pundits claimed was only a problem for rich “tech bros.” But SVB was the 16th-largest bank in the United States and its speed-of-social-media implosion left observers and regulators grasping for answers, which made it easy to blame the bank's failure on corrupt venture capitalists trying to cheat the system. After SVB, the San Francisco-based First Republic bank also started to melt down, while the crypto-focused Signature and Silvergate banks went into closure, a pattern that reinforced the notion that this was a Silicon Valley phenomenon being hyped up by wealthy venture capitalists looking for a government bailout.

As New York University professor Scott Galloway wrote on March 19 in a sneering tweet (since deleted but still cached), “Hunger games on the way up, Denmark on the way down,” a reference to scathing commentary he'd made on *Face the Nation*. There he argued that venture capitalists seem to want less government when times are good but government intervention when things go south. This was a tidy, retweet-friendly way of packaging the disaster in an easy to digest narrative primed for social media's us-versus-them binaries.

Then Credit Suisse happened. After rapid outflows of deposits and a nose dive in its stock, Credit Suisse was acquired at the polite but firm suggestion of Swiss regulators by rival UBS, a development that put to rest the narrative that this was a Silicon Valley phenomenon and exposed the global nature of the banking failure, while pointing to its underlying causes.

While the current crisis has echoes of the 2008 global financial crash, the reality is that it's more a toxic byproduct of the government's response to the '08 crash. It also has the potential to be considerably worse. When the U.S. government bailed out banks that had taken outrageous risks in the housing market, it ignited an era of loose monetary policy. To fund the \$800 billion Emergency Economic Stabilization Act and similarly sized American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, as well as to stimulate the economy (though these two efforts were essentially one and the same) the Fed cut interest rates to 0% for the first time in history. While there was an expectation that interest rates would stay ultralow for some time, the Fed kept them under 1% for almost 10 years. By 2019, the Fed's balance sheet had swollen to \$4 trillion. But the public, which enjoyed soaring stock markets, low mortgages and car loans, and the lush fruits of easy money, was placated.

Of course, it didn't hurt that the Obama administration, with the enthusiastic backing of the media, successfully messaged the idea that the government had recovered the funds used for the 2008 bailouts. “We got back every

dime used to rescue the banks,” Obama said in a campaign speech in 2012. This was later shown to be false, since the actual taxpayer cost of the bailouts was around half a trillion dollars.

Then COVID hit, and the Fed began printing money like it was going out of style—and now it might be. In 2020 alone, the Fed created \$3 trillion in virgin money compared to 2019 when it injected \$115 billion into the economy—a nearly thirtyfold increase. It would print another \$2 trillion in the two years after that. As a result, the money supply has increased more in the past three years than in the preceding decade. Put another way, more dollars were put into circulation between 2014 and 2022 than in the entire recorded history of the dollar.

And where did the COVID trillions go? Into the banks, primarily, which invested some of that money in long duration Treasury bonds, since that is the sensible thing to do when you come into trillions of dollars. The catch, however, is that when banks began investing the money in those bonds, the Fed was forecasting the interest rate would remain unchanged into 2023, which meant the value of bank-held long-term bonds would hold steady. (When interest rates go up, bond prices go down and vice versa.) But interest rates didn't stay low. They went up. And it wasn't just that they “went” up, as if by some natural force of economic anti-gravity. They were driven up by the same institution that created the tidal wave of new money while forecasting low rates into 2023: the Fed. For its part, the Fed was doubly betrayed by reality when inflation, which it (along with many media and political figures) had dutifully labeled “transitory,” started to look a bit more permanent.

The Federal Open Market Committee is the key Federal Reserve committee responsible for setting the federal funds rate, which is the rate at which banks can loan each other money. In other words, it sets the benchmark interest rate for the economy, which also determines how much money flows through the system. Far from the 0.1% rate that was predicted by the Fed in 2020, rates

have risen to 4.7%, which means the Fed missed its own estimate by 47 times. What this means is that banks behaving with the Fed's projections in mind now have a Titanic-size hole in their books. The value of those long-duration bonds banks snapped up in 2020 (when it was the safe thing to do) has plummeted, worth up to 10%-50% less than they were supposed to be worth. Meanwhile, banks have incurred liabilities in the form of loans and investments predicated on 2020 bond prices. The banks are, in simple terms, underwater—and not just in Silicon Valley due to greedy tech bros but, as *The Economist* recently reported, across the country.

The Fed's rate hike on Wednesday delivered a hybrid message, increasing the federal funds rate by 0.25% but also signaling this will be the last, or second to last, increase. "Recent developments are likely to result in tighter credit conditions for households and businesses and to weigh on economic activity, hiring, and inflation. The extent of these effects is uncertain. The Committee remains highly attentive to inflation risks," the Fed Open Market Committee wrote. But with the banking sector in crisis mode, even this modest rate increase—coming in place of a pause in raising or a drop in rates—could inflame the debt crisis, putting more banks at risk.

Despite the expressions of public shock in the days after Silicon Valley Bank's collapse, the writing was on the wall. The investor Ray Dalio argued in his newsletter that SVB's collapse, far from being an unforeseeable "black swan," represented "a very classic event in the very classic bubble-bursting part of the short-term debt cycle." Describing the mechanics behind the breathtaking risk the economy is now facing, Dalio wrote: "Tight money [employed] to curtail credit growth and inflation leads to a self-reinforcing debt-credit contraction that takes place via a domino-falling-like contagion process."

What Dalio means is that the Fed can no longer raise interest rates without causing the value of long-duration bonds held by hundreds (if not thousands) of banks to drop again. But if the Fed lowers rates and loosens the money supply it risks creating more demand,

"SVB's collapse, far from being an unforeseeable 'black swan,' represented 'a very classic event in the very classic bubble-bursting part of the short-term debt cycle.'"

increasing wage growth, and sending inflation even higher, which, after 15 months of rising prices, could morph into the kind of runaway inflation that might trigger an even more severe economic crisis. The Fed has placed itself in a damned if you do, damned if you don't scenario.

Dalio is not alone in his doomsaying. Nouriel Roubini, the economist who predicted the 2008 crash, told Bloomberg, "It's an extremely dangerous moment, because there's now significant stress in some parts of the U.S. banking system at a time when inflation is still too high." In an interview earlier this month, Roubini—who called the current scenario a "debt trap" weeks before Silicon Valley Bank went under—described how the situation could realistically unfold:

The Fed will have to keep raising rates in spite of what happened with SVB. Then we will have a recession. That recession is going to cause more defaults, because as income falls, people who have too much debt are going to default. And then the increase in bond yields and market spreads is going to cause a recession [that's] even more severe. So it will be a negative feedback between the real economy and the financial markets with an

economic crash leading to a greater financial crash making an economic downturn more severe.

Roubini noted that the total equivalent of fixed-income long-duration assets (basically, long-term debt instruments, of which bonds and certificates of deposit are examples) in dollars is a staggering \$20 trillion, of which, he says, \$10 trillion could be wiped away by raising the interest rate by enough to bring inflation down. Moody's has downgraded the entire U.S. banking system from stable to negative, citing a "rapidly deteriorating operating environment."

It's this that led famed "black swan" investor, Mark Spitznagel, to say last year that we might witness "the greatest tinderbox-timebomb in financial history," with repercussions not unlike what was experienced during the Great Depression. The reason for the extreme language is that in the globalized economy, the debt crisis is global. Foreigners hold \$1 trillion in U.S. currency and around \$12 trillion in long-term debt. With bond prices plummeting, this places foreign banks and other debt-holders in the same situation as American debt-holders. More importantly for the future of the U.S., it incentivizes foreigners to dump the dollar. With China, Russia, Iran—and other countries who have suffered the wrath of the U.S. Treasury acting as the pointy end of America's geopolitical stick—banding together to create new methods of trading outside the dollar, this exigency is now turning into a reality.

This is where disaster could cascade into catastrophe. A flight from the dollar would soak the economy in even more currency as foreign investors sell their dollars in exchange for more stable options. In such a scenario, no amount of interest rate raising could contain the damage without creating even more destruction—higher unemployment and more bursting bubbles. After 20 years of comforting ideas about infinite, easy money, the U.S. is now hoping that someone will be left to bail us out of a mess of our own making. ■

This article was originally published on March 22, 2023.

THE REST

→ Executives at three major vaccine manufacturers, GSK, Moderna, and CSL Seqirus, told Reuters on Wednesday that they are **developing human vaccines for the strain of bird flu that has killed 59 million American birds** in the past year. The H5N1 influenza virus has not yet been able to pass from one human to another, but on the rare occasion when humans have contracted it from an animal, the mortality rate was near 50%. Most of the doses are already allocated to the world's wealthiest countries, the drug makers said, citing existing contracts, though no evidence has been presented that these drugs could thwart the spread of the virus. Speaking about the difficulty of making vaccines for poultry that may also apply to vaccines for humans, Jarra Jagne, an associate professor at Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, told *Fast Company*, "Vaccinating for avian influenza viruses is a complex undertaking that includes a myriad of issues. Avian influenza viruses change frequently, making vaccines obsolete in a very short time."

→ For a minute last week, potential home buyers breathed a sigh of relief as **mortgage rates dropped for the first time since November**. The average rate **dropped from 6.71% to 6.48% due to reduced yields on U.S. Treasury bonds, as investors flocked to them for safety during the banking crisis**. According to the Mortgage Bankers Association, even the tiny drop in rates sent new applications and refinances to a six-week high. But it's not all good news for those on the hunt for a new house. Goldman Sachs COO John Waldron told German paper *Handelsblatt* that small banks may be required to have more capital on hand going forward and may be regulated more strictly, potentially leading them to slow lending, which will slow the economy. From their childhood bedrooms, millennials are watching the dominoes fall as the one-two punch of inflation and high interest rates means they'll be spending the rest of their thirties inviting dates back to their parents' house.

→ The State Department **summoned Israel's ambassador to the United States, Mike Herzog, on Tuesday for a dressing-down, which hasn't occurred between the two allies for more than 10 years**. The topic was the recent Israeli decision to rescind certain elements of the 2005 disengagement law that removed all Israelis from Gaza and parts of the northern West Bank, the area currently in question. Vedant Patel, a spokesman for the State Department told reporters that the legislation "represents a clear contradiction of understandings the Israeli government made to the United States" referencing a letter from then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to President Bush promising to evacuate several settlements in the West Bank to help with a potential future peace plan, which, they did.

→ It was reported this week that the **Chinese government is in talks to sell Argentina its JF-17 fighter jet as well as some 8x8 armored vehicles**. The disastrous war between Great Britain and Argentina over the Falklands Islands in the 1980s, coupled with subsequent American and British sanctions against arms sales to Argentina, have long made it difficult for the South American nation to grow its military. But while Argentina's military remains relatively weak, the country's choice geographical footprint makes it a desirable investment for Beijing, which is willing to cut a deal with Argentine officials on the jets and military trucks to build a partnership that would become another feather in China's cap as Beijing works to create a new multipolar global order.

THE BIG STORY

Following the Russian Air Force's interception of two American B-52 jets flying near the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad on Monday, NATO's Allied Air Command released new footage on Tuesday showing an American B-52 jet flying over Europe with an escort of fighter jets from Spain, Italy, and Romania. The air-muscle flex, part of a NATO exercise that Air Command described as "strengthening our Euro-Atlantic partnership," comes amid renewed support by NATO allies for Ukraine in its war with Russia.

The British Minister of State for Defense Annabel Goldie told Parliament on Monday that the United Kingdom would send Ukraine depleted uranium shells along with 14 military tanks. The shells are the subject of much debate, due to their potential downstream effects on civilians who are exposed to them.

Goldie's announcement didn't sit well with Russian President Vladimir Putin. At a press conference with Chinese premier Xi Jinping, Putin said on Tuesday that "if this happens, then Russia will be forced to act accordingly." Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov added fuel to the fire on Wednesday saying, "I wouldn't want to dive into a discussion about whether the likelihood of a nuclear conflict is high today, but it is higher than anything we have had for the past few decades, let's put it that way."

—Sean Cooper

SUBSCRIBE TO THE SCROLL



Point your smart
phone camera at the
QR code to receive The
Scroll in your inbox

Literary Phenom Flames Out

Aleksandar Hemon's new novel is a tedious progressive frog march through the horrors of the 20th century

BY HUBERT ADJEI-KONTOH

From its ponderous title to its inane contents, *The World and All That It Holds*, by the Bosnian American novelist Aleksandar Hemon, is a novel that manages to be disappointing in every possible way. But to be fair to the author, I have to say this is the type of book that I am predisposed to hate. It is an epic story of love set during a major military conflict, and it is also an adult-takes-care-of-a-poor-child-that-he-finds book. Perhaps, the earned (if torturous) sentiment of the former genre was supposed to cancel the kitschy smarm of the latter, but no dice. Instead what you have here is a drawn-out, tediously plotted work that manages to satisfy all the necessary conditions of a novel without ever seeming like it needed to be one. It felt like reading an extended treatment for a miniseries, and who knows, maybe it would work better as one. As a novel, it's a failure.

The World and All That It Holds is a warning about what can happen when a talented author loses track of what exactly has drawn them to writing in the first place. In his early novels like *Nowhere Man*, Hemon, who grew up in the former Yugoslavia, displayed the facility with the English language he'd learned as an adult, detailing the cultural and geographical displacement of his sometimes autobiographical characters. In the ensuing decades, he has become a full-fledged literary celebrity, winning prestigious awards and even collaborating with the Wachowskis on the most recent *Matrix* sequel. He's

also, from the perspective of the establishment, politically sound: In a January *New York Times* interview, Hemon denounced Philip Roth for the "pro-Trumpist" novel *The Human Stain*, the "deplorable" *American Pastoral*, and for his "steadfast commitment to the many privileges of male whiteness." *The World and All That It Holds*, by contrast, is obediently progressive. It has received overwhelming praise in *The Guardian*, the *Financial Times*, and *The New York Times* for its multicultural gay love story and its daring use of multiple languages, including a few that the author himself does not speak.

The novel's protagonist is an apothecary of Sephardic Jewish descent, Rafael Pinto, whom we meet in Sarajevo in a laudanum-induced haze on the eve of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. War soon breaks out, and Pinto is drafted into the Austro-Hungarian army, beginning a series of encounters with war, starvation, and death that will propel him through the rest of the book. His only respite from the carnage of the trenches is his love affair with Osman, a Bosnian Muslim storyteller. The best thing that I can say about this section of the novel is that it flowed without incident. Hemon is a fair hand at depicting the more gruesome scenes of trench warfare, which he weaves in with the stories that Osman tells his fellow soldiers. Yet, by the time that Osman and Pinto are almost killed by Russians during the Brusilov offensive, then captured, separated, and reunited in the time it takes for Russia to go through a revolution, the prose begins to drag,

even irritate, serving little purpose other than to keep track of the characters as they move through the upheavals of the 20th century.

Of course, this has to occur because Hemon's main character is more beset upon than Job, and for the next 30 years, the only major massacre that Pinto doesn't witness is the Holocaust. In order to escape the Bolsheviks and protect the young child in his care, Pinto goes east. He is chased through the desert by marauders only to end up in Shanghai, where he is roughed up by enforcers and barely evades death at the hands of the occupying Japanese forces. Many bad things happen, yet events add up so quickly that Pinto is lost in the mix and never really develops as a character. More sketch than person, he is defined by things that happen to him more than by what he does, a flaw exemplified by the central fact of Pinto's character: his opium addiction. For stretches of the novel, Pinto is merely a doped-out spectator to history, a junkie Zelig, and the writing suffers for it:

Opium is the religion of the individual, Pinto had once quipped as Lu was rolling a pellet to be smoked. But Lu was far too seriously devoted to his task to acknowledge Pinto's cleverness. He was now just as dedicated to the thing at hand, his somber face reliably gorgeous. Everything was so beautiful. The teak chest was beautiful, Lu was beautiful, the



PODCASTS



Point your smart phone camera at the QR code to explore Tablet's podcasts.

ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

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

luminescent dragons on his beautiful face. His fingers were delicate instruments, now that he was wrangling the opium paste with two needles, as if knitting, to make it into a pellet. Everything was about to become even more beautiful.

It's never majestic, merely overwrought. As if Hemon knew that his book was hollow, he ends it with an explanation for why we are following these characters in the first place. Generally, if you've gotten through an entire

story and you need to attach a coda explaining why you told it, there's a good chance you shouldn't have. I won't spoil the ending, but I will say that it feels like it's there to make you *really think* about everything that has transpired. Unfortunately, it worked. I thought about everything I'd read and felt even more deflated.

This is generally the point where a generous reviewer would praise Hemon's ambition for tackling such a vast subject, but I don't know if I believe that. The preference for the large and

the grandiose can be a form of vanity; it's the hope that if there was a massive conflict the camera would turn to us to take in our suffering and pain. But of course, we know that isn't true, especially now as everything that we see from any conflict is dispatched in fragments of fragments, making it impossible to figure out what exactly is happening at all. It would take a writer of real ambition to tell a story like that. ■

This article was originally published on March 22, 2023.

COMMUNITY

Indonesia's Jews Come Out

In the world's most populous Muslim country, a new generation of Jews strives for visibility

BY JOHANNES NUGROHO

I feel I have a duty to represent the Jewish community—and other religious minorities, too," said Ezra Abraham, a 29-year-old resident of Cirebon, West Java, in Indonesia. He is part of a new generation of young Indonesian Jews whose visibility is growing. "The time is now," he said. "If not us, then who?"

Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation, is currently home to around 500 Jews, out of a population of over 275 million. But as Indonesians of Jewish ancestry have started to publicly reclaim their heritage over the past two decades, the community is thriving like never before.

Rabbi Benjamin Meijer-Verbrugge leads the United Jewish Indonesian Community, a nondenominational group with 180 registered members across the country; while he identifies as Ashkenazi and Orthodox, his

organization is open to all traditions within Judaism. "We have also had several conversions," he said, "mainly from Christians."

Abraham belongs to the Sephardic branch of Indonesian Jewry, one with a history stretching back to the Iraqi Jews who arrived in what was then known as the Dutch East Indies in the late 1800s or early 1900s. Led by Emma Mizrahie, these Iraqi Jews joined Surabaya's existing Jewish community—made up of Jews from Dutch, German, Portuguese, Spanish, and Polish backgrounds—under the leadership of Izaak Ehrenpreis and Rechte Grunfeld. The community registered with the colonial government under the name of Israelitische Gemeente van Soerabaia (the city's old spelling), East Java, and went on to build the first synagogue in the city in 1923: Beth Shalom, which gradually went into decline after WWII. The communal organization was resurrected in

the early 2000s some 1,000 miles away in Tondano, North Sulawesi, under the name Shaar Hashamayim Indonesia (Israelitische Gemeente Indonesie in Dutch), and now runs the only legally recognized synagogue in the country: Kahal Kadosh Shaar Hashamayim, which follows the Portuguese and Spanish rites under the supervision of Rabbi Yaakov Baruch.

Abraham, however, lives more than 1,200 miles from Tondano in Cirebon, a city of around 340,000 on the northern coast of West Java. Starting out as a fishing village in the 15th century, it soon became the seat of power for the Sultanate of Cirebon, from whose lineage Abraham's mother is descended. A port city in the old days, Cirebon attracted multiethnic settlers to its shores, including Jews, Chinese, and Arabs.

Abraham was born out of a union between his Jewish father and Muslim mother. After being raised Muslim, he decided to convert to Reform Judaism in 2012. Three years ago, he returned to the Sephardic roots of his father's ancestors, who had immigrated to Indonesia in the early 1900s.

"Life would probably be easier if I had chosen to remain a Muslim after my mother, but the ancestral calling was stronger," he said, chuckling. His father, Frederick Ludwijk Patty, is still alive but is an agnostic. Both his parents approved of his decision to convert. Abraham now has siblings who are Christian and Muslim; it's a multifamily, he said.

Abraham and one other friend who also discovered his Jewish roots are the only Jews in their hometown. Abraham now meets up with his Sephardic brethren in Tondano and Jakarta—130 miles from Cirebon—for communal worship whenever possible.

An avid activist for religious pluralism, Abraham has for the past few years appeared on talk shows and podcasts to represent Jewish Indonesians—something that was unthinkable until recently. “When I was about to go on a talk show hosted by a Muslim cleric for the first time, many of the old [Jewish] folk here tried to talk me out of it, saying it was risky,” he said.

Rabbi Benjamin Meijer-Verbrugge officiates UIJC’s first wedding in Ambon, 2021. Courtesy Rabbi Benjamin Meijer-Verbrugge

Caution, he said, was the principle older generations of Indonesian Jews lived by. Abraham said, given their past trauma, he could understand why so many of his predecessors chose to keep their Jewish identities secret.

Most Jews in Indonesia are descended from the thousands of Ashkenazi Dutch Jews and other Europeans who migrated in the early 19th century and subsequently intermarried with the non-Jewish local population; others trace their Sephardic roots to immigration from Iraq and elsewhere. Today, however, almost all Indonesian Jews were born and raised in the country.

Abraham’s father was born here. So was Meijer-Verbrugge’s father. But they were raised in a time when Indonesian Jews had to hide their identity.

After invading the Dutch East Indies in 1942, the Japanese interned more than half of the local Jewish population of around 3,000, classifying them as Dutch combatants. Things turned worse the following year when non-Dutch Jews were detained and subsequently forced to work in labor camps. Those who managed to evade arrest fled overseas or obscured their Jewish identity by converting to other faiths.

“My grandmother, Miriam Frieda, who grew up during WWII, had to hide her Jewish identity for fear of being arrested by the Japanese,” said Abraham. “She did this by converting to Roman

“My grandmother, who grew up during WWII, had to hide her Jewish identity for fear of being arrested by the Japanese.”

Catholicism. But my grandmother never made it a secret within the family that we had Jewish blood.”

After WWII, when most Jews were interned or fled, those who came back found that their properties, like all those belonging to the Dutch, had been seized by Indonesians. Most decided to leave the country for other Jewish communities in Southeast Asia, notably Singapore, or start over in Israel. The remaining Indonesian Jews have had a low-profile existence since then, subsisting as a hidden subculture of secret heritage and public conformity.

Today’s Jewish community is largely made of native-born Indonesians like Abraham who have begun to reclaim their Jewish identity. No longer feeling they need to live double lives, more Indonesian Jews are now open about their faith in their daily lives, and more importantly, on social media, where more than 60% of Indonesians interact with one another.

The internet had helped usher in a new age for Judaism in Indonesia, said Avshalom Benayahu, who lives in Manado, North Sulawesi, about 20 miles from the synagogue in Tondano. Being online helps Indonesian Jews, who are scattered across the archipelago, to connect with each other. In celebrating

Purim recently, for instance, different small communities in various cities held their own rituals but came together online via Zoom.

“Like most Jews here, my family also converted to another faith to avoid stigma,” he said. “I was raised as a Christian, like most Manadonese.”

But growing up, the 42-year-old heard stories from older family members that he was Jewish. Retracing the family ancestry in the early 2000s, they constructed a family tree and managed to identify their Jewish ancestors and established their Jewishness beyond doubt. Benayahu converted to Orthodox Judaism in 2009 and is currently training to be a rabbi under Meijer-Verbrugge.

“Before my conversion, I felt isolated and alone in Manado,” he said. “Thankfully, social media provided me with a means of reaching out to other Indonesian Jews, which is how I first made contact with Rabbi Benny [Meijer-Verbrugge].”

Meijer-Verbrugge, 52, was born and raised a Muslim in Jakarta to a Jewish mother and Javanese Muslim father. In his adult years, he decided to become a Christian before converting to Reform–Conservative Judaism in 2011 and Orthodox Judaism in 2021 following the death of his German Jewish maternal grandfather, Benjamin Verbrugge, who died in 2003. “My grandfather charged me with the duty of reviving my Jewish heritage,” he said. “This was his final wish.”

The senior Verbrugge had played an important role in his grandson’s discovery of his Jewish identity from an early age. “When I was 5,” he said, “he used to gather his grandchildren around him to tell us we were Jewish.”

The Indonesian state only recognizes six religions; Islam, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism. The freedom to adhere to other faiths is guaranteed by the constitution, although discriminative practices against minority faiths—in job promotion among civil servants, school dress code for non-Muslims, and, in extreme cases, forced evictions from homes—are common.

The rabbi pointed out it’s still

impossible for an Indonesian Jew to have his or her faith listed on the mandatory National ID Card, called a KTP: “As things stand, even if you have all the proof that you practice Judaism, you will get put under ‘other faiths in God’ category.”

Meijer-Verbrugge said that despite the growing visibility of Jews in Indonesia, prejudice and stigma still exist. Hostility comes largely from the country’s Muslims, most of whom grew up with the notion of Jewish people as enemies of their religion. A public poll carried out in May 2022 by Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting found 51% of Indonesian Muslims had serious misgivings about having Jewish neighbors, 57% opposed having Jews teach at public schools, and 61% objected to Jews becoming government officials.

Surabaya’s Dutch-era synagogue in 2017, before its demolition Wikipedia

Abraham said, however, he had never experienced extreme prejudice living in a Muslim-majority city: “Part of the problem is that the decadeslong invisibility of the Jewish people has made us into the convenient, never-seen bogeyman,” he said, stressing that greater engagement outside the faith will help dispel the prevalent misconception and disinformation about Jews. “At past interfaith events, Muslim participants were initially uncomfortable when I told them I was Jewish. But by the end of our frank discussions, most would’ve modified their stance.”

He said putting real faces to Judaism in Indonesia makes it far less surreal, adding some of his biggest supporters in the interfaith community used to be skeptical of Judaism.

Aan Anshori, a Muslim cleric and pluralism activist working in Indonesia’s largest Islamic organization, the Nadhatul Ulema, described the antipathy toward Jews among Muslims in the country as “culturally deep-seated.”

Anshori said most Indonesian Muslims grew up hearing the story of how the Prophet Muhammad died after being given poisoned food by a Jewish woman. He added that the issue of Palestinian independence has given a modern-day context through which Indonesians see the Jewish people as

“It’s still very difficult for us here to find life partners who are also Jewish. The implications are obvious for the next generation.”

villains. In 2013, for instance, following protests by Islamic groups over the Israel-Palestine conflict, Surabaya’s Dutch-era synagogue was sold to a developer and razed to the ground, despite being previously declared a heritage site.

“The key to turning this around is to instill the importance for coexistence between Islam and other faiths today,” Anshori said passionately.

The Rev. Irma Simanjutak, a Christian pastor and activist for religious pluralism, is also a firm believer in dialogue between all faiths. The last week of January, she attended the Jewish-Christian-Muslim Conference in Manado. The Shaar Hashamayim synagogue hosted the interfaith meet-up, which also commemorated International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

“What struck me most about the conference was the informal and relaxed atmosphere,” Simanjutak recalled. “Muslims and Christians had been having a dialogue in Indonesia for a long time and it was refreshing to have our Jewish brethren present for the last three years.”

North Sulawesi, a Christian-majority part of Indonesia, remains the only region to have allowed the construction of a new synagogue. Simanjutak believes there is a lot of goodwill among

Indonesian Christians—who make up about 10% of the country’s population—toward Judaism, many of whom see it as the precursor to their faith. She said that when she spoke to Christians in Manado, the capital city of North Sulawesi, they kept referring to Tondano’s Shaar Hashamayim synagogue as “*gereja Yahudi*,” or Jewish church.

Shaar Hashamayim’s Rabbi Baruch, a 40-year-old native of North Sulawesi who grew up in a Christian family in Manado, said establishing rapport with other faiths in Indonesia sends a clear message that Judaism is a religion of peace. “It also signifies to the other faiths that we are a people open to all,” he said. “By taking part, we are being included in the conversation between religions at the national level.”

Meijer-Verbrugge, though he remains optimistic about the future, said that Indonesian Jews have a number of challenges stacked against them, both internal and external. “Our small number means coordination and communal events are more difficult and expensive to organize,” he said. Not all Indonesian Jews are high-income earners, he added; many earn the minimum wage, around US\$132 to \$333 a month. “This means many can’t afford memberships in international Jewish organizations or travel to meet with their brethren overseas.”

Another challenge is more fundamental, he said: “It’s still very difficult for us here to find life partners who are also Jewish. The implications are obvious for the next generation.”

Abraham said he has ruled out marrying outside the faith. “Fortunately,” he said, “my girlfriend is willing to convert” to Judaism.

Baruch, however, has some sobering advice for his fellow Indonesian Jews, saying the greatest enemy often comes from within. He gave an example of how new converts to Judaism openly disparaged their former faiths on social media. “It falls on the leaders of our community to rein in such fanaticism,” he said, “because we want Indonesian Judaism to be an inclusive faith.” ■

This article was originally published on March 21, 2023.

The Future of Jewish South Africa

Three neighborhoods offer different visions of the community's place in the 'Rainbow Nation,' three decades after the end of apartheid

BY JOHN BESCHE

On a Shabbat morning in Johannesburg this past January, about a dozen people braved the summer heat to daven at Temple Israel Hillbrow. The synagogue has striking art deco motifs and a midcentury modern interior but no air conditioning. Many at Temple Israel pray in the same well-worn leather chairs where their own kids used to sit. Midway through a *dvar Torah*, or sermon, on the scourges of corruption, racism, and the government's refusal to condemn Putin's invasion of Ukraine, the lights went out.

"Ah, well," shrugged shul chairwoman Reeva Forman, who was giving the *dvar Torah*. She carried on, calling up the youngest in attendance to read a prayer for South Africa.

Many of the congregants are grandparents, and their adult children—those who haven't emigrated on account of the rolling blackouts and the economic uncertainty—are often wary of bringing the grandchildren to shul. Hillbrow exists in the popular imagination as one of the most violent urban areas in Africa. Temple Israel Hillbrow, a Progressive (think Reform) congregation of about 30 members, is the last active synagogue in the city center once known as Jew-hannesburg.

Johannesburg—locals also call it "Joburg" or "Jozi"—remains a hub of Jewish life in South Africa. The country has just over 50,000 Jews, which, while less than half the peak population of 120,000 in the 1970s, is still the 12th-largest Jewish diaspora in the

world. And those left behind, those who have not fled to Australia, Israel, or the U.S., are now engaged in a series of internal migrations that are reshaping Jewish life in South Africa every bit as much as the exodus to other countries. While still centered in large cities, they are moving and sorting in ways that will be familiar to Jews elsewhere, ways that have a lot to say about race, economics, and the shape-shifting realities of Jewish demographics, in South Africa and throughout the diaspora.

Broadly speaking, there are three possible iterations of a Jewish urban future in South Africa. There are those usually politically progressive, liberal Jews, who remain committed to the old Jewish neighborhoods. Then there is a group of Jews who, swept up in a religious revival in the 1960s, built a yeshivish, or highly observant, Orthodox enclave in Glenhazel, a northern Johannesburg suburb. Finally, there is the cosmopolitanism of Sea Point, a wealthy, oceanfront Cape Town neighborhood, thick with cultural Judaism and amenities but with less observance or political passion.

Under the system of apartheid, which ended in 1994, society was divided into White, Black, Asian, and Coloured (referring to predominantly mixed-race Afrikaans speakers). The system designated Jews as White, and, generally speaking, Jews benefited from this position. But they were uneasy about it. Many post-WWII immigrants were uncomfortable with the ruling National Party's Nazi sympathies and the apartheid state they maintained. Jews also

stood on the front lines of change; to take one famous example, Helen Suzman, a Jew, was the only opposition member of South Africa's parliament for over a decade, and is remembered nationally as an icon of the anti-apartheid movement. Jews' relationship with apartheid remains complicated, and the post-apartheid Jewish urbanism of Johannesburg reflects that.

Joburg Jews once lived in the center city, in neighborhoods like Hillbrow. After apartheid ended in 1994, Jews mostly resettled in the city's northern sprawl toward Sandton, a ritzy patchwork of gated communities that is Africa's richest square mile. Hillbrow got left behind, and today it's hard to convince an Uber driver to take you there. To such fears, Reeva Forman formed antlers with her hands and cooed: "Oooohhhh, verrrry scary."

Forman, who runs a cosmetics company in addition to chairing Temple Israel Hillbrow, zips around Jozi in a white BMW. She's one of many in Joburg to style herself as a maverick. Sure, she snickers at the potholes and the road rage resulting from nonfunctional traffic lights. But she has no inhibitions about Hillbrow. Originally from the old Jewish neighborhood of Doornfontein, Forman gushes with pride when she tells people about her parents' pharmacy where, in stark contrast to other businesspeople, "they served everyone."

Driving around the half square mile of uniformly 10-story, concrete-forward apartment blocks, Reeva lowers her window to chat with people on the street corners. Her commitment to Hillbrow derives from her sense of Ubuntu—a Bantu word for "humanity" that has become a philosophy in its own right. Ubuntu preaches a collective sense of responsibility toward all people. She thinks of it as *tikkun olam*, but she takes it a step further. Forman

T MORE TABLET

There's more to discover at
tabletmag.com

believes the role of Jews in South Africa is to help actualize what Archbishop Desmond Tutu called the “Rainbow Nation,” a post-apartheid vision for a harmonious multiracial democracy.

“The Jews have an obligation first to their own, and then equally to those who are not Jewish on our doorstep in Hillbrow,” Forman said.

For Forman and many in the congregation at Temple Israel Hillbrow, sticking it out in the old neighborhoods is the way forward for South Africa’s urban future. They are among many to allude to Hillbrow as an urban technology for upward mobility. The Jews were once immigrants and so now are the Nigerians and Zimbabweans, Forman says.

“What happened with Johannesburg is sort of similar to what happened to places like Detroit,” according to Irwin Man-oim, a historian of South African Jewry. “The center of the town imploded, and people kept [migrating] to the suburbs. And that’s the reason why the Jews and every other community kept moving ... Hillbrow started falling apart for reasons unrelated to the Jews. It started falling apart, if one wants to call it falling apart, as apartheid started falling apart. Ten or 15 years before the end, what happened was Indians and Coloureds were moving illegally into areas like Hillbrow ... It was also partly a demographic thing in terms of the fact that people living in Hillbrow at that time were all the older generation, who hadn’t moved with the younger people that moved to the suburbs, which is where the schools were.”

In response to the political anxieties and dislocations of the time, says South African Jewish Museum Director Gavin Morris, Johannesburg experienced an Orthodox religious revival. Foreign rabbis of the Ohr Somayach movement promoted a return to Orthodoxy. That community gained a foothold in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg with an epicenter in Glenhazel, where one now finds kosher sushi, private security, and a yeshiva. Glenhazel is much more religious than other Jewish suburbs in Johannesburg, or just about anywhere else in South Africa.

In large part due to Glenhazel’s population, 48% of Johannesburg’s Jews identify as Orthodox, compared with

“The reason Joburg is more religious than Cape Town is that in Cape Town they have a mountain and nice walks.”

only 22% in Cape Town, according to a survey by the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research at the University of Cape Town. Think of Cape Town Jewry as 20th-century American Jewry on the Upper West Side, or Beverly Hills—attached to their Judaism, less attached to their shul.

Historian Milton Shain chalks up much of the Cape Town/Joburg religious divide (in jest) to topography. Relaying a quip from former Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris, “the reason Joburg is more religious than Cape Town is that in Cape Town they have a mountain and nice walks.” Cape Town is flanked by beaches and wineries. Johannesburg is a bit “sharper,” to use Morris’ term. All agree that Cape Town and Johannesburg are the future of South African Jewry (and that the Jewish community in Durban, South Africa’s third-largest city, will disappear within a few generations). Cape Town’s primary Jewish neighborhoods, Sea Point, Vredehoek, and Gardens, are constrained by mountains and the Atlantic Ocean. Sea Point, at the end of Helen Suzman Boulevard, is extremely cosmopolitan, boasting stylish oceanfront condos and an upmarket New York-inspired noshery. Though Sea Point is widely perceived to be Cape Town’s “Jewish neighborhood,” it’s one of the most diverse in South Africa. Along with Jews, you can

find substantial populations of Chinese, English (as they call white South Africans who don’t speak Afrikaans), and Black South Africans.

These three distinct Jewish communities reflect three Jewish responses to the “Rainbow Nation” hopefulness that was so widespread when apartheid ended. In Hillbrow, the Jews are staying, hard up against the non-white people who have become the overwhelming majority in their area. They value diversity, and still see it as a template for the South African future—one to which Jews can contribute. In Glenhazel, Jews are, similarly, staying put, and committing to a particular Jewish role, one that emphasizes not integration, but internal cohesion. And in Sea Point, many Jews live in a micro-Rainbow Nation—or if not, then it’s a metaphor that has outlived its usefulness.

“There is a very particular trajectory of that term [Rainbow Nation],” said professor Adam Mendelsohn, director of the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research at the University of Cape Town. “It falls out of fashion. In fact, it’s in a way connected with the fortunes of the [African National Congress] itself. That and that we already see during the [President Thabo] Mbeki period, but very much during the [President Jacob] Zuma period, that sort of a racialization of political discourse by the party, as its fortunes become increasingly troubled.”

Post-apartheid Jewish urbanism in South Africa thus points toward three distinct futures: the Ubuntu Jews of Hillbrow, the yeshivish of Glenhazel, and the cosmopolitanism of Sea Point. Still, the majority of South African parents want their children to study abroad. In each of these scenarios, Jewish life in South Africa is touch-and-go, anticipating a moment where it becomes untenable, or anxieties reach critical mass. In 2021, 555 South Africans made aliyah to Israel, the highest number since 1994. As for the others, well, many have their bags packed for that other aliyah, the one with a better coastline: They are looking toward Perth. ■

This article was originally published on March 22, 2023.

Orthodox High School Musical

For observant students in all-girls schools, exuberant theatrical productions are part of a long-standing, if often overlooked, tradition

BY HANNAH RUBIN

A cart wrapped in wood contact paper trundles on stage, pushed by a figure in an overcoat and downy beard. Emblazoned on its side in curlicued script: “Yankel’s Yarmulkes.”

“Here it is,” the seller booms, approaching a forlorn, pantaloons-clad youth. “My magical yarmulke, my special kippah—which I present to you, Chananya Yom Tov Lipa!”

We are at opening night of *The Magic Yarmulke* in early January. The cast: teenage students at the all-girls school Bais Yaakov Miami. The audience: a sold-out crowd of more than 900, all female, predominantly religious. The plot: A schlimazel sees his life turn around after donning a kippah he believes is enchanted, only to learn that transformation comes from within. The moral: Believe in your God-given strengths.

Each year, spiritually instructive tales like this one are performed by students in Orthodox girls schools across the U.S., at institutions associated with the Bais Yaakov educational movement and otherwise. Whatever their specific connection to Orthodoxy, these student-led productions reflect much the same amateur enthusiasm and earnest effort of their secular cousins: collaborative feats of line-perfecting, harmony-composing, dance-devising, scenery-painting, costume-sewing, and sleep-sacrificing.

But Bais Yaakov plays constitute an eccentric canon, with particular tropes and settings. One classic example: An immigrant family wrestles with religion and modernity in early-20th-century

New York. Or, more relatably: A modern-day teenager reckons with the spiritual dangers of her iPhone.

Whatever the tension or milieu, all Bais Yaakov plays carry a message, resonant and unambiguous: Cleave to tradition; observe the commandments; trust in God.

High School Musical this ain’t.

But two days earlier, Julius Littman Performing Arts Theater—owned and operated by the municipality of North Miami Beach—looked rather different. Its seats were vacant, save scattered clusters of ponytailed girls. Onstage, a semi-circle of thespians rehearsed rhyming couplets. Another student knelt stage right, perfecting a homemade prop. Which is to say, it looked very much like run-through day at any American high school before the premiere of a major student production.

“So we’ll have blackout, and you’ll walk off,” the director called to her cast.

Music prompted arm-waving. Successes warranted hugs. Committee huddles were preceded by cheers (“Tech-ni-cal! Who!”). Jitters, amity, exhilaration—the room fairly crackled with almost stereotypical theater kids’ energy.

Many people, not least many Jews, might have been surprised at the scenes I observed from seat B103 at the Littman. School-sanctioned creative expression like this hardly aligns with recent controversies around the failure of certain Orthodox schools to meet basic education standards. Then again, Orthodoxy’s scholastic landscape is far more nuanced and varied than is generally understood.

The Magic Yarmulke and hundreds of productions like it spring from a vibrant and oft-overlooked educational ecosystem with a remarkable history.

The Bais Yaakov origin story begins with Sarah Schenirer (1883-1935), a Krakow dressmaker who in 1917 started a girls school in her studio to restore religious commitment among disenfranchised young women. In certain streams of Orthodoxy, the tale bears the halo of legend.

As well it might: In Schenirer’s day, Orthodox Krakow faced a crisis of female defection. Educated in Polish schools, Jewish girls assumed the worldviews and demeanor of their non-Jewish classmates. Many balked at the yeshiva *bochrim* presented as mates, running away from home or converting.

Schenirer believed formalized religious instruction could foil the deleterious effects of exposure to secular ideas. To her mind, Jewish girls needed to learn the profundity of their tradition. Religious schooling for girls was neither without precedent nor challenge—not least, rabbinic injunctions against teaching girls Torah—but uniquely, Bais Yaakov’s mission included the notion that every Jewish girl should receive religious schooling.

Her passion was infectious. From Krakow flowered a network of similar schools, founded and led by Schenirer’s students. By her 1935 death, more than 200 Bais Yaakovs existed in Poland and beyond—mostly supplementary schools attended outside public school hours, but also full-day schools and teachers seminaries. Their cumulative curriculums spanned Judaic, secular, and vocational instruction.

This well-roundedness aligned with a key influence on Bais Yaakov: German neo-Orthodoxy, a brand of traditional Judaism molded by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-88) to counter Reform Judaism. As professor Naomi Seidman of the University of Toronto demonstrates in *Sarah Schenirer and the Bais Yaakov Movement: A Revolution in the Name of Tradition*, Bais Yaakov drew heavily on the Hirschian credo of “*Torah im derech erez*”—the principled fusion of Torah with boundaried

modernity, which offered Polish Jewry a model for confronting the wider world.

Bais Yaakov also had publishing operations, special rituals, and summer camps, making it as much a movement as a web of institutions. Seidman notes how Bais Yaakov co-opted features of multiple “isms”—socialism, Zionism, feminism, Yiddishism—it was ostensibly fighting, adapting hallmarks of those movements to forge its own unique character.

It’s a dynamic best understood in the context of interwar Jewish Poland, which was characterized by ideological fluidity and overlapping identities. So while Bais Yaakov sought to defend against the cacophony of clashing doctrines, writes Seidman, students inhabited an environment in which “multiple affiliations and blurred boundaries” were possible.

In its not-quite-hermetic state, Bais Yaakov engaged avidly in a pastime absorbed from the surrounding culture: theater. As Seidman has described, staging plays was a major part of the Bais Yaakov experience from its early days, not to mention a potent marketing tool. Performances electrified small towns, promoting interest in Bais Yaakov even among irreligious girls. Intrigued Yiddish papers reported on these spectacles.

That the phenomenon arose among female youth and not their male counterparts was not coincidental. Traditional Judaism places greater observance demands on boys—in particular, around time spent studying Torah—leaving them less time for recreational activities. They not only didn’t perform in their own theatrical productions, they weren’t part of the audience for the girls’ shows, either; doors at these performances were open to women only. Aside from the prohibition of “*kol isha*,” which forbids men from hearing women sing for reasons of modesty, it was considered inappropriate for boys to watch girls perform at all.

Scripts were issued from Bais Yaakov’s central office (Schenirer wrote several herself), often depicting narratives of religious heroes. Others came from students, who lightly satirized teachers. And there was, of course, the

drama before the drama: monthslong rehearsals, preparation of costumes and posters.

How did the rabbinic establishment respond to these amateur dramatics? Not as negatively as one might expect.

Despite isolated opposition—according to the research of professor Rachel Manekin of the University of Maryland, the Belzer Rebbe told Schenirer not to stage plays because it was “*chukat ha’goy*” (a gentile practice)—performances were broadly seen as benign. “When discussing plays in Bais Yaakov schools in Poland, one must take into account the broader context. School plays were part of Polish school culture and were performed at schools of all kinds,” explained Manekin.

To Schenirer and Agudath Israel, the Orthodox organization that subsumed Bais Yaakov in 1923, producing plays was simply part of running schools. Moreover, says Manekin, theater attendance was an acceptable form of recreation for Krakow’s Orthodox women before WWI. Schenirer herself would attend such plays—in many ways a choice that parallels those made by Orthodox individuals and institutions today as they negotiate a secular world. Conceding, maneuvering, evolving, resolving: It’s the dance of a life spent betwixt and between.

But for Bais Yaakov students in America, where the movement was reborn post-Holocaust, that dance is far less choreographed than it might appear.

Bais Yaakov today, it’s worth noting, has no central office or cohesive ideology. No authority governs the opening of new schools. Instead, North American Bais Yaakovs function under loose affiliations with Torah Umesorah, an organization supporting Orthodox education.

Nor is Bais Yaakov associated with a particular Orthodox sect: “It transcends the typical classifications,” Seidman told me, noting that there are women from Hasidic, yeshivish, Ashkenazi, and Mizrahi backgrounds who identify as Bais Yaakov students and alumnae. “The phenomenon of Bais Yaakov floats above those ethnic and ideological distinctions.”

This fuzziness compels Leslie

Ginsparg Klein, a scholar of Orthodox girls’ education in America, to call Bais Yaakov a *category*. “It’s a category of school attracting a certain demographic: girls from right-wing Orthodoxy,” she said. “And that makes Bais Yaakov as diverse as that population.”

Klein divides Bais Yaakov schools into three groups: right-wing, moderate, and community schools. Large Orthodox communities can accommodate multiple schools of different persuasions, from the very conservative to the less so. The larger the community, the more microgradations are born, so that in large centers there are tens of schools, each serving a specific slice of the *frum* population. Smaller “out-of-town” communities often have a single Orthodox girls school with a diverse student body and policies open enough to reflect its broad constituency.

Bais Yaakov schools across these groups share beliefs fundamental to Orthodox Judaism, but diverge in their approaches to aspects of lived life, from school dress codes to internet use. In a talk for Harvard Law School, Klein explained: “All Bais Yaakovs provide secular education. But some provide the minimum for state approval, while others offer robust programs and rigorous college prep.”

Accordingly, it’s a genre of school that evades definition—and census-taking. Many Bais Yaakovs do not maintain websites, and some do not have Bais Yaakov in their name. By Seidman’s estimate, there are today roughly 300 Bais Yaakovs in Israel, 105 in North America, and 30 across Europe, South America, and elsewhere.

But across North American Bais Yaakovs, Klein explains, a very particular student-generated, girl culture spans geography, ethnicity, and ideology. “There are markers that signify belonging to the Bais Yaakov world,” she

NEWS

Everything you need to know at [tabletmag.com/sections/news](https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news)

said in her Harvard talk. Songs, styles, cheers, dances, and vocabulary constitute a transcendent repertoire bridging locational and philosophical divides. Cross-school pollination occurs at summer camps and conventions, where new forms of cultural expression are learned and brought home. Filtered through the sieve of faculty approval, they may be canonized into Bais Yaakov tradition. What results are shibboleths of Bais Yaakov culture linking students in Lakewood, New Jersey, to their compatriots in Montreal and Los Angeles.

“In a sense, this Bais Yaakov-esque culture replaces secular culture,” Klein told me. “But the Bais Yaakov world is far from impervious, selectively absorbing elements from the outside.”

At the institutional level, Bais Yaakovs mimic secular schools. Days are divided into periods, and uniforms—long, pleated skirts and Oxford blouses—imitate classic preppy styles. Likewise in the extracurricular sphere, where student papers, yearbooks, holiday events, and student council are standard.

And, of course, school plays.

For the record, Bais Yaakov performances are never called “theater.” Rather, plays are colloquially known as “productions,” or less commonly, “concerts.”

But by any name, production is the jewel of the Bais Yaakov experience. Here’s what I was told by some of the cast and crew of *The Magic Yarmulke*:

Shira: “Singing in front of a million people is scary, but you feel so accomplished after.”

Esther: “We laugh even when it’s stressful; we know it’ll work out.”

Railey: “We hang out with friends during after-school practice, singing, dancing, doing what we love ... It’s just fun!”

Deborah Loebenberg, a veteran producer of East Coast Bais Yaakov performances, said: “It’s so fulfilling for girls to cultivate their talents. They have fantastic ideas.”

You can also hear it from me: I am a Bais Yaakov alum, and while I carry many lessons with me, what I remember most fondly are my production memories. This hardly makes me unusual for a reformed high-school

“Students whose pens falter in the classroom come alive when handed a paintbrush or microphone.”

performer—but if the power of Bais Yaakov theater is familiar, the phenomenon is ever-morphing.

“In the early days, Bais Yaakovs in America performed Broadway plays,” Klein said in her Harvard lecture. With judicious rewriting, those scripts were made appropriate for Orthodox audiences. “But Bais Yaakovs moved increasingly rightward, and by the late 1980s, teachers were writing original plays suited to their community.”

Klein also described varying attitudes toward incorporation of secular music. “Some schools forbid use of non-Jewish songs,” she said. “Others allow older melodies, or take a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ approach.” (Some Bais Yaakovs care less about the source than the sound. Per Klein, one school wouldn’t allow Hasidic rock music by Mordechai Ben David but approved the more sedate “Love Changes Everything” by Andrew Lloyd Webber—reborn as “Torah Changes Everything.”)

Whatever the bass or plot line, Bais Yaakov productions today can be quite impressive. Fancy auditoriums are rented and elaborate sets built. Flyers and playbills—with de rigueur ads for local businesses—are distributed. Several months, usually in winter, are substantially dedicated to rehearsals. And talent abounds.

Although faculty or outside hires provide top-level direction, students assume much of the responsibility for these ex-nihilo productions. So on a recent Wednesday evening, the lights were blazing in the lunchroom at Beth Rivkah in Brooklyn. (Beth Rivkah is a Lubavitch-associated school system that maintains connections with Bais Yaakov.) Uniformed students sprawled on benches among supper containers and textbooks, watching their friends rehearse.

Two girls—playing the roles of Anshel and Zev, male tailors from a shtetl—ran through their lines. Next, a dance troupe twirled on, headed by 11th graders, followed by a giggly choir. There was cheering (“12-A, yeah!”) and a director’s instructions (“Zip your lips!”).

It all evoked aching nostalgia for this alum: for time spent cross-legged, memorizing harmonies spilling from a boombox; for unforeseen friendships; for midnight pizza amid bolts of fabric and perched guitars. Across the sweep of geographic and religious terrain, Orthodox girls are experiencing versions of the same things: shy smiles, smothered disappointments, inchoate pride. Warm glows and cold feet. Spats and solutions. The rush of creative generation, the thrill of autonomy at an age when authority chafes. The whole messy, magical *mélange*.

In the final crunch, schools allow practices during class hours. By faculty admission, these disruptions are worthwhile. “Production offers tremendous value,” said Zlata Press, high school principal at Bnos Leah Prospect Park Yeshiva in Brooklyn. “There’s this influx of creativity and intergrade bonding.”

Another oft-cited benefit: Students whose pens falter in the classroom come alive when handed a paintbrush or microphone.

But to Rochie Berkowitz, principal of Chaviva High School in Cleveland, production supplies something even more essential. “Production gives girls an opportunity to step up and lead. So it’s not just ‘I practiced it,’ but ‘I created it and worked through the social dynamics.’”

But if the primary goal of production is to give students a wholesome outlet, there’s a secondary purpose that touches

audience members, too: the provision of moral instruction. The most interesting demand made by Bais Yaakov plays is that observers leave with renewed religious commitment: to improve their prayers, focus less on materialism, etc. Each aims to move its audience to greater piety.

Purposeful narrative arcs lead inexorably to tidy lessons, which students often find meaningful. “They know they’re conveying powerful ideas,” said Malka Aisenbach, who co-directs Beth Rivkah’s productions.

In this intention to instruct, Bais Yaakov theater in a sense redefines the relationship between performer and audience: Students become teachers, community members their students. A traditional theater critic might well recoil at these plays, not least because good theater generally does not tell you what to think. Bais Yaakov plays unabashedly do just that.

The superstructure of Bais Yaakov performances also nods to these didactic aims: Productions are often prefaced by short speeches outlining the topic explored, and close with theme songs hammering the message home. Songs and dances—performed between scenes—also reinforce lessons. Any good Bais Yaakov girl knows the Conflict Dance: a group of girls half in black and half in white, swirling in mirrored choreography, the collective incarnation of moral dilemma.

Other things expected from Bais Yaakov plays:

- Melodrama
- Deus ex machina
- Actresses collapsed in sobbing heaps
- Reunions of long-lost siblings
- Piano transpositions (for dramatic flair)
- Picardy thirds (for an uplifting musical finish)

Many plots feature antisemitic villains (Romans, Cossacks, Nazis). Others revolve around spiritual peril and secularizing influences. These tropes illuminate Bais Yaakov’s understanding of itself vis-a-vis the outside world, often presented as a place of moral danger.

And plays foregrounding historical enemies reflect an insular community’s focus on its millennia-old exilic state.

Indeed, their contents arise from the Orthodox experience to such a degree that outsiders would find them inscrutable. A viewer without knowledge of Jewish history and practice would be mystified by the settings (Inquisition-era Iberia?), conflicts (cantonist decrees?), and diction (*erev yontif?*) of Bais Yaakov performances. They demand of their audiences significant cultural capital. (That said, they are also empathetic to audience needs: The Miami school moved from somber plays to upbeat ones recently, reckoning that life can be heavy enough.)

If the lessons of Bais Yaakov plays seem simplistic or moralizing, they nonetheless affirm the audience’s core beliefs. Few of the cultural signals trotted out on stage are more insidery than this: the willing receipt of moral instruction, at any age. Done well, it should be said, the dramas can be spine-tinglingly moving.

Other ways Bais Yaakov productions differ from ordinary high school theater stem from a communal emphasis on modesty. For starters, of course, there’s the all-female cast. And in an inversion of Elizabethan theater, male roles are played by girls. Because of modesty concerns and prohibitions around cross-dressing, sewing committees churn out baggy pantaloons—pants that are not quite pants—for those roles.

An even bigger differentiator: the lack of romance. In the traditional world Bais Yaakov inhabits, romantic love is considered sacred and deeply private, so productions eschew it wholesale. Most don’t contain so much as a *shidduch* date.

Notably, Bais Yaakov plays are equal-opportunity performances: All students are encouraged to get involved, mostly by appearing on stage, but also by working on costumes, scenery, props, lighting, or sound. Some schools require each girl to go on stage. The archetype of theater kids as stage-obsessed divas or misfits seeking safe spaces hardly applies at Bais Yaakov, where production is a schoolwide affair.

Thanks to this trifecta—inclusivity,

modesty, an absence of dalliances—physical appearance is less important on Bais Yaakov stages than on others: Lead roles are given to girls of various physiques. Dance is not solely the province of the thin and lithe. Students feel little pressure to look a certain way, limiting body image anxieties.

The model of girlhood provided by Bais Yaakov is enmeshed in the single-sex youth experience it entails. Without the pressures of coed environments, girls feel no need to squelch their personalities or meet a feminine ideal to garner male attention.

In *Mystics, Mavericks, and Merry-makers: An Intimate Journey Among Hasidic Girls*, Stephanie Wellen Levine analyzes the confidence and “surprising disinhibition” she observed among female Lubavitch students: “Here’s the irony: Lubavitch girls, ensconced in their patriarchal system, validate their own existence and define their own standing in the world,” she writes. “Spirited personality, not the ability to inspire male desire, is the key to popularity in their circles.”

And ultimately, she notes, the absence of males gives these girls more “leeway to hold on to their childhoods a bit longer, to work on their friendships, their spiritual growth, and their intellectual development.”

This was a strength harnessed by Bais Yaakov since its founding. Seidman has described its single-genderedness as “the most powerful tool in the movement,” noting how deep connections were forged between girls in the early days through celebrations, literature, and ceremonies.

The same force fuels the production experience, energizing Bais Yaakov girls to sing, act, and dance their hearts out.

It’s 30 minutes to showtime at the Julius Littman Performing Arts Theater.

Bewigged *bubbies* and moms in *tichels* schmooze in the lobby, holding balloons and bouquets. Among them flit costumed girls, buoyant and shining in demure stage makeup.

And when the lights dim, and the curtains part, and the house stills, there they are: earnest, solemn, beaming; not quite children, not quite grown-ups;

braces flashing, glasses glinting; the vulnerabilities of teenagehood—the pimples and pounds—softened by spotlights and forgiving costumes.

They're having the time of their lives: the schoolgirl ensemble in plaid jumpers and French braids, wheeling around in stockinged feet; the actress striding on-stage; the giddy dancers in ballet buns and kaleidoscopic jumpsuits.

Some are soulful: Choir girls—etereal in long skirts and shimmering neck

cuffs—sway, prayerlike. A soloist stands like a supplicant in a circle of light, luminous face furrowed.

But most charming, at least to this viewer, was the *humanness* poking through: The finger-fiddling actress. The dancer mouthing, “I messed up!” The props committee scuttling across the stage during blackout. The director facing her performers with a sign reading “SMILE.”

Because while they strive to impress,

Bais Yaakov schools never purport to be Broadway. Their goals supersede the productions themselves, which shows when the entire Bais Yaakov Miami crowds on stage for finale. Flush with victory, they sing the show's theme song, waving their arms and whooping.

Perhaps *The Magic Yarmulke* was not entirely devoid of magic, after all. ■

This article was originally published on March 20, 2023.

COMMUNITY

A Visit With Raphael Mechoulam, the Israeli Godfather of Cannabinoid Research

The scientist, who died this week at age 92, studied the beneficial effects of cannabis on trauma, colitis, autism, and more

BY MADISON MARGOLIN

It smelled like weed as I walked past a grassy, tree-shaded area recently near a water fountain and benches at Hadassah Medical Center in Ein Kerem, an affiliate of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. I smirked; the campus atmosphere was quiet and studious, but it seemed even the world's highest ranking academics like to get high.

Home to a modest medical marijuana program that serves some 40,000 patients, Israel is nonetheless leading the world in cannabis research and, not to mention, cannabis consumption—nearly 30% of the country's population has tried the stuff in the past year. While cannabis is decriminalized for an amount limited to personal use, weed is

as integral to the social fabric here as it is back home in America—but more on that later.

I approached a nondescript building made from Jerusalem stone (all the buildings here are made from Jerusalem stone) that read “The School of Pharmacy בית הספר לרפואה” above a single glass door. The building was nothing special; neither was the dingy stairwell where I hiked up to the second floor; and neither was the landing, except for a cute poster about “cocaine reward conditioning.” The floor was dedicated to drug research. I circled the gray, sterile corridor twice, passing open doors revealing active chemistry labs (unwashed beakers, test tubes, and other stuff that goes over my head), as I looked for the office of Dr. Raphael Mechoulam.

If the building belonged to *High Times* magazine, there would have been a red carpet leading up to his doorway. The now-90-year-old scientist was first in the world to isolate tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC—the compound in weed that gets you high (and helps with dozens of medical conditions). In 2011, *High Times* dubbed Mechoulam “The Man,” and rightfully so: He is the godfather of cannabis medicine. His discovery of the THC molecule in 1964—a year after he isolated the nonintoxicating compound cannabidiol, or CBD—launched a scientific revolution based on the study of cannabinoids, which are chemical compounds that occur naturally in the cannabis plant and endogenously throughout the human body.

Interviewing Mechoulam is every weed journalist's dream. I tried to act cool, taking in the environment. The walls were lined with file cabinets and bookshelves filled with wide, decades-old binders with handwritten labels (“lipid chemistry,” “patents,” “cancer,” “cannabinoid reviews,” to name a few) along with books on science, cannabis, and other plants. Framed diplomas and awards in English, Hebrew, and even German flanked one corner of the room; in the other hung a black chalkboard with drawings of the THC and CBD molecules. “I can draw them in my sleep,” Mechoulam joked: After 40 minutes together, he had finally warmed up to me.

Initially we had gotten off to a cool start as he reminded me he doesn't have much time. He had looked at me blankly, “So what can I do for you?”

Why cannabis? I asked him. “For

thousands of years, the only drugs available were drugs from plants,” Mechoulam told me. Cannabis has been used for medicinal and spiritual purposes since the beginning of mankind for everything from Queen Elizabeth’s period cramps to religious ceremonies around Latin America and India. “Morphine had been isolated from opium in the early 19th century and cocaine from coca leaves, but the active compound from hashish had never been isolated in pure form,” he continued. “In a small country like Israel, if you want to do significant work, you should try to do something novel.”

There was little interest in cannabis, Mechoulam said, when he first set out to study it. “Perhaps nobody used or smoked marijuana at the time,” he joked, recalling his efforts in the early 1960s to secure grant money from U.S. agencies for research. But then the National Institute of Drug Abuse got back in touch, about a year after Mechoulam approached them. “The son of some senator was caught smoking pot and wanted to know if it would destroy his brain,” he remembered. While cannabis research in the United States remains limited to this day thanks to a federal prohibition on marijuana, NIDA has helped fund Mechoulam’s research for nearly 45 years.

The world’s leading cannabinoid expert was born into a well-to-do Sephardic Jewish family in Sofia, Bulgaria, on Nov. 5, 1930. Mechoulam’s father was a physician and the head of Sofia’s Jewish Hospital before being sent to a concentration camp, which he survived. His mother was educated in Berlin, and raised him with an emphasis on “books, theater, concerts, and medicine.” When WWII broke out, the Mechoulams moved from village to village, as “anti-Semitic laws made our life almost unbearable.” In 1949, they emigrated to Israel.

Mechoulam got his first taste of research during his army service, studying insecticides. He got hooked, calling research “an addiction from which I do not want to be cured.” In 1952, he received his Master of Science in biochemistry from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and in 1958, his doctorate from the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot. There he began to dabble in cannabis science.

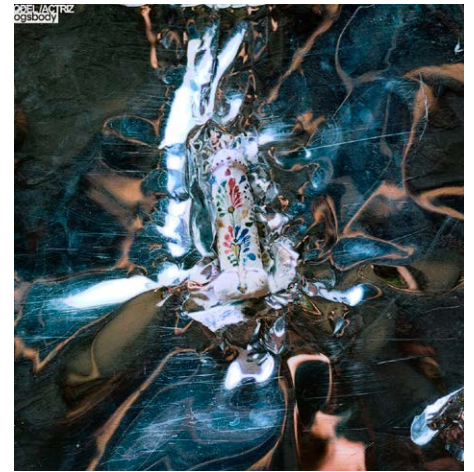
The Israeli police were Mechoulam’s first lead. As Israel didn’t legalize medical cannabis until the 1990s, the authorities were the only entity legally in possession of hashish—then, the most popular form of cannabis in the region. Mechoulam, a young, straightedge academic (to this day, he claims that he doesn’t smoke), was able to convince the police he was reliable enough for them to gift him five kilograms of “superb, smuggled Lebanese hashish.” Such was the beginning of a four-decade relationship.

On the medical front, there is hardly any stigma surrounding cannabis: Israel’s medical program is fully integrated among university research, hospitals, private labs, medical cannabis companies, and the Ministry of Health. The first phase of cannabis research in Israel was on phytocannabinoids, the cannabis plant’s chemical compounds like THC or CBD (which now is expected to be a \$22 billion business in the United States alone by 2022). The plant contains about 120 cannabinoids, many of which are now a hot research topic among various academics and private labs throughout Israel, Canada, the United States, and elsewhere.

The second phase of research was on the endocannabinoids anandamide and 2AG. These are compounds similar to those found in the cannabis plant, but which occur naturally in the human body. The body’s endocannabinoid system regulates a host of physiological functions, including sleep, pain, inflammation, mood, and appetite. “[Endocannabinoids] have a different chemical structure than plant cannabinoids, but the same type of activity, which is not unusual,” Mechoulam explained.

Mechoulam and his colleagues discovered the endocannabinoid, anandamide, sometimes called the “bliss molecule,” in the 1990s, and named it after the Sanskrit word *ananda*, meaning supreme joy. “We looked for a Hebrew name,” Mechoulam joked, “but as you may well be aware, Jews are not very happy. We have a lot of words for being down and so on, but not so many words for extreme joy.”

Hashish arrived in the Middle East during the Middle Ages, thanks to merchants returning from lands like India,



Album of the Week

Model/Actriz, *Dogsbody*

One of the biggest influences on Cole Haden of the punk band Model/Actriz is the musical *Cats*. “I ascribe to the ideology that *Cats* has infiltrated everything that I’ve ever made,” Haden told Interview back in 2021. “It’s 25 people making direct eye contact with the camera, breaking the fourth wall, super slow, dissonant orchestration over a liturgical reading of ‘The Naming of Cats.’ It filled me with sexual vigor and terror. I’m always chasing that.”

He caught it on his band’s remarkable debut album, *Dogsbody*. One of the sharper alt-rock-electronic-punk albums from the early part of the century, like *Sound of Silver*-era LCD Soundsystem, mixed with the brutality of what’s poetically referred to by some music writers as “pigfuck,” it’s an album that sounds like being in the middle of a hurricane, or a particularly rowdy mosh pit.

Dogsbody, which takes its name from Ulysses, is a hot album. Sex and love are predominant. *Dogsbody* is also as bold as any classic punk album, offering a sound that’s as punishing as it is addictive. It may feel a little harsh at first, but let it wash over you.

—David Meir Grossman

where cannabis, mainly in the form of *charras* or hash, was and is a popular sacrament among Hindu devotees of the Lord Shiva. (Cannabis, in hemp and flower form plays no small role in Jewish practice, as well, beginning in biblical times, but that's another story.) By the early 20th century, Egypt had become the main consumer of hashish, with Greece having been the main provider. But as a new middle class in Egypt developed "hand in hand with the British occupation," they saw hashish as a "lower class drug," Haggai Ram, professor of history and Middle Eastern studies at Ben-Gurion University in the Negev, explained to me. Hashish was banned in 1925, and within a decade, Greece followed suit. Lebanon and Syria then surfaced as new primary suppliers of black market hashish moving toward Egypt.

As the through route from Lebanon to Egypt, "Palestine was officially the largest depot of hashish in the Levant in the interwar years, [and] a theater of intensive and dramatic smuggling or trafficking operations," said Ram. "As it always happens, some of that merchandise remained in Palestine for home consumption, actually creating a market for hashish."

Israel-Palestine witnessed a spike in hashish smoking during the 1920s and '30s. Ram noted: "You have in every Palestinian city—Jaffa, Jerusalem, Tiberias, Acre—multiple venues of hashish smoking, such as hashish dens, cafés, and coffee houses, which served hashish to customers." Arab, or Mizrahi, Jews took part in hashish culture alongside their Muslim and Christian neighbors, as the Holy Land became the Amsterdam of the Middle East. "People could be seen in the streets intoxicated [and] the police had no real interest in hashish enforcement," he continued. "They had other priorities: Jewish immigration and Arab revolt."

Ashkenazi Jews who immigrated to the land looked down on hashish, much the same as the British-inspired middle-class Egyptians did. And so there was a movement to dissociate the Arab Jews from hashish as a means of dissociating them from Palestinian culture. "During the mandate period, the Zionists rapidly endorsed humus, seeing it as an authentic dish, but hashish was a wholly

"Since the second intifada, a rise in right-wing politics and religious fanaticism among both Israelis and Palestinians has led to more conservative attitudes toward cannabis."

different matter," said Ram. "Using hashish would cross a border which should not be crossed because it [was seen that it] could make you an Arab. It became an important distinguishing mark between Jews and Arabs."

But the dissociation of Jews from cannabis lasted only briefly after 1948. Jews from Arab and North African countries immigrated to Israel, bringing their own customs from back home, and settling in transit camps, where it was found in the early 1950s that they were growing their own cannabis for home consumption. "They suffered from poor sanitary and hygiene conditions, poverty, and neglect, as well as ill-treatment and discrimination by the state," Ram writes in an article titled "Hashishophobia and the Jewish ethnic question in mandatory Palestine and the State of Israel," published in the *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. "Beset by these adversities, transit camps soon evolved into centers of drug wheeling and dealing and substance abuse."

Mechoulam's luck in procuring his research materials was therefore a byproduct of Israel's own drug war—a campaign that continues to disproportionately affect Arabs and Mizrahi Jews in a manner similar to how in America blacks are almost four times more likely than whites to be arrested for cannabis despite

comparable rates of use. Yet by the 1960s, hashish smoking spread among Ashkenazim, too, as part of a global movement whereby cannabis fueled the growing counterculture. Immediately after 1967, hashish wholesalers, especially in East Jerusalem, redirected their merchandise from Egypt to the local market, bringing an increase in customers, Ram explained. "But more than that, the occupation of Jerusalem and the West Bank also gives Israeli smokers or would-be smokers direct access to the market, so Jerusalem after 1967 becomes a mecca of hashish in Israel," he said. "The substance loses its distinctly primitive, oriental connotations and Israel opens up to the global scene." By the 2000s, Israel was dubbed a "nation of stoners" in *Haaretz*.

In my own man-on-the-street reporting with an Arabic translator throughout East Jerusalem and Bethlehem, indeed it seems that since the second intifada, a rise in right-wing politics and religious fanaticism among both Israelis and Palestinians has led to more conservative attitudes toward cannabis, especially among the latter group, and there remains a stigma around cannabis in Palestinian communities, though an underground culture of consumers does exist. Four different strangers in East Jerusalem referred to a conspiracy theory painting Israeli efforts to legalize weed as an attempt to make Palestinians too lazy to fight back.

Israelis, however, from all walks of life, religion, and politics, have come to accept cannabis, at the least, as a medicine. Even former Prime Ministers Ehud Barak and Ehud Olmert have both joined Israel's medical cannabis industry, while ever since the Lebanon War, cannabis flower has replaced hashish as a homegrown alternative to "supporting Hezbollah." There were also fears about imported hashish being poisoned, Liel Maghen, co-director of the Israel Palestine Center for Regional Initiatives, explained to me one night in Jaffa over *shisha* and *kanafeh*. A cannabis-fueled way of life for Israelis grew into a way to deal with, or escape from, the micro and macro episodes of trauma that come with living in an intermittent war zone. On a Thursday night in March, Iron Dome intercepted a rocket aimed for Tel

Aviv. I heard the explosion, got tea with a Maghen, went to a concert, and hung out with him and others till the wee hours of morning getting high in a cloud of never-ending pot smoke. Everyone was high, and perhaps, also, silently anxious. Life goes on, and the approach seems to be living life more intensely.

The war with Lebanon, then the wall built between Israel and Sinai, and the proliferation of medical cannabis permits (with diversion of pre-rolled joints from the medical program to the black market) have all led to a greater amount of Israeli-grown flower, rather than hashish, on the market. Kibbutzim have taken to growing weed, while Israelis returning from their post-army trips to India bring back the drug culture savored on the beaches of Goa.

So suffice it to say, it's easy enough to get weed in Israel these days. Make a call, send a text, you'll get your delivery within an hour. The most popular platform has been Telegrass, something of an Uber for weed dealing: The app lives on the anonymous messaging platform Telegram. Israeli authorities have been going after leading dealers on Telegrass for years: They successfully arrested founder Amos Dov Silver in Kiev in March, and he told me last year that Telegrass "is stronger than me by now," and he's right. The phone app is already back in use, despite the raid. So are several other similar apps on Telegram like GetWeed or Weed4U.

As for your everyday consumer, cannabis is decriminalized for possession of up to 15 grams. About 90% of the populace supports decriminalization, said Oren Lebovitch, head of Ale Yarok (Green Leaf), Israel's cannabis legalization party, while at least 100,000 voters support full-on legalization. Even Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said he would seriously consider the issue "soon."

But there's a tension in Israel between proponents of medical cannabis and full legalization. "If you look back at the people who brought the whole idea of medical cannabis to the world, they were legalization activists, so the patients owed them," Lebovitch said. "And the other way around: Thanks to the medical cannabis patients, the legalization idea went much further. People saw, 'OK, it's not

that bad, cannabis can help people.' It softens the stigma."

Now in the third phase of his research, Mechoulam is currently investigating other endogenous compounds related to anandamide, the endocannabinoid he discovered more than 20 years ago. These compounds have implications for a wide range of indications for everything from head injury to osteoporosis to addiction. In particular, anandamide is integral to autism.

"In autism, the levels of anandamide are low," Mechoulam said. "And yes, CBD is an excellent anti-autism drug." That's because CBD inhibits an enzyme called FAAH, which breaks down anandamide. But when anandamide can't be broken down, it accumulates in the brain—which is exactly why CBD is especially helpful for people, like autism patients, with anandamide deficiency.

To learn more about Israeli research on cannabis and autism, I caught a ride from Tel Aviv to Rishon LeZion with Ma'ayan Weisberg, who leads international relations and business development for Tikun Olam, Israel's largest medical cannabis provider, to meet with the company's medical director, Lihi Bar-Lev Schleider, in the Assaf Harofeh Medical Center. Schleider established the research department of Tikun Olam a dozen years ago, initially focusing on cannabis for Crohn's disease and colitis. We ordered Aroma coffee, as she ran through her research on autism, which has spiked in prevalence by 15% in the United States alone.

A study on the effects of high-THC joints in 2010 revealed the efficacy of cannabis for spasticity and dystonia, and increased quality of life and personal interactions in patients, which led researchers to plan autism trials. As recently as this year, Schleider published a study on cannabis for 188 children diagnosed with the disorder. "We saw that more than 90% of patients who suffered from agitation, aggressive behavior, and restlessness reported improvement in those symptoms," she said. Some even reduced their use of other pharmaceutical medications.

But, Schleider cautioned, cannabis "is not a miracle, it's not a one drug fits

all." She and her colleagues are working diligently to understand how different patients (even with the same condition) interact with different cannabis strains, or plant varieties with different ratios of cannabinoids and terpenes (aromatic compounds). "There's a whole aspect of genetic evaluation, which I hope will help us understand who are the patients who will benefit the most and who will be most likely to withdraw from the treatment," she said. "It's not one drug for each condition. It really depends on symptoms."

In collaboration with Israeli hospitals and universities, Tikun Olam and other medical cannabis companies are developing pharmaceutical-grade treatments, with consistent effects as flower (pre-rolled joints), oil, tinctures, and other products. "Tikun Olam [Hebrew for "repair the world"] has a very heavy meaning that we've taken on our shoulders," Weisberg said. "The clinical trials we're doing here are not just for ourselves. Every trial Lihi does gets published and that reaches doctors and changes the legitimacy and way the medical world perceives [cannabis], so more patients can have access to it, whether in Israel or outside Israel." Indeed, Tikun Olam has American outposts in states like Florida, California, and Delaware.

"Israel is one of the leading countries in the world in cannabinoid research, and the reason for that is because we started when nobody else was doing it," Mechoulam told me. "In the next decade or maybe less, we shall have cannabinoid drugs on the market," he said. "By drugs, I mean compounds that have been looked into, that have gone through clinical trials that are parallel to any other drug. We can have that for disease like depression, schizophrenia, anxiety, post-trauma."

In a land especially wracked with trauma, perhaps it's fitting that the Holy Land, the homeland to different peoples, is the homeland of cannabis research, too. "Cannabis works, no doubt about it. It works," Mechoulam is famous for saying. "Essentially in every disease that has been investigated, the endogenous cannabinoid system is involved." ■

This article was originally published on April 18, 2019.

Garlic Soup

with Yogurt, Feta, and Paprika

BY PAOLA GAVIN

INGREDIENTS

FOR THE SOUP

- 1 head garlic, cloves separated, peeled, and very thinly sliced**
- 4 ½ cups water**
- 2 Tbsp extra virgin olive oil**
- 2 bay leaves**
- ½ teaspoon dried oregano**
- 1 cup plain yogurt**
- 1 Tbsp unbleached white flour**
- salt**
- freshly ground black pepper**
- ¼ lb crumbled feta cheese, for serving**
- 2 medium eggs**
- paprika, for dusting**

FOR THE CROUTONS

- 2 Tbsp extra virgin olive oil**
- 3 or 4 thick slices country bread, cut into cubes**

PREPARATION

TO MAKE THE SOUP

Step 1

Bring the water to a boil together with the garlic, 2 Tbsp olive oil, bay leaves, and oregano and simmer for 15 minutes.

Step 2

Beat the yogurt with 1 Tbsp unbleached white flour until it is smooth and free of lumps. Gradually add a ladleful of hot soup, then slowly pour the mixture back into the hot soup. Simmer for five minutes, but do not boil. Remove the bay leaves. Add the feta, simmer for two or three more minutes, then puree in a blender until smooth and creamy.

Step 3

In a bowl, beat the eggs until they are frothy. Slowly stir in a ladleful of hot soup, then pour the mixture back into the soup. Heat through, but do not boil, or the soup may curdle. Season with salt and black pepper. Pour the soup into four individual soup bowls, dust with paprika, and serve with fried croutons.

TO MAKE THE CROUTONS

Step 1

To make the croutons, heat 2 Tbsp olive oil in a frying pan and add the diced bread in a single layer. Cook over a moderately high heat until they are golden both sides. Remove from the frying pan and set aside.

Yield: Serves 4

Hundreds of recipes at
tabletmag.com/recipes

