

# THE TAB

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## NEWS

# Knight Takes Rook in Cold War II

The new global conflict with Russia and China is playing out like a game of 3D chess, with the U.S. up in some areas but losing in others

BY MICHAEL LIND

**G**lobal power politics takes place in multiple dimensions, much like a game of 3D chess. Different players compete on different levels, though some are playing on every board.

Consider the war in Ukraine. This conflict, comparable to the proxy wars in Korea and Vietnam during the original Cold War, can be understood as the first proxy war in the current Cold War between the U.S. and post-Soviet Russia. It can be analyzed on three levels: regional, continental, and global.

At the regional level, the war is a struggle between Ukraine, which seeks to maintain its territorial integrity, and the Russian regime of Vladimir Putin, whose initial war aims failed, and who has since been reduced to trying to break off and annex the regions of eastern Ukraine with Russian-speaking majorities while terrorizing civilians and destroying civilian infrastructure. Ukraine fits into a larger regional pattern for Putin, who openly laments the dissolution of the USSR, and has long engaged in efforts to dominate buffer states around the borders of the post-Soviet Russian Federation. There was Chechnya (whose

independence movement was brutally suppressed), South Ossetia (broken off from Georgia in a brief war in 2008), Crimea (which Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev transferred to the Soviet Republic of Ukraine in 1954, and which Putin seized from Ukraine in 2014 and later annexed to Russia), and Ukraine itself, where Russia has been aiding and financing a war in the eastern provinces of the country since 2014. Belarus, another former Soviet republic, remains nominally independent but is closely allied with Russia under its president, Alexander Lukashenko.

Putin seems to have believed that a brief, successful assault on Ukraine would allow him to install a friendly government in Kyiv, while detaching the eastern portions of the country. Instead, the Russian invasion met massive resistance from the Ukrainian government of Volodymyr Zelensky, backed up by military aid from the U.S. and its NATO allies, which also levied harsh economic sanctions on Russia.

But countries waging campaigns of war have often overrun their initial budgets of blood and treasure yet emerged victorious at the end. If the Ukraine war ends with Russia indefinitely controlling portions of eastern Ukraine as

well as Crimea, then Putin will have achieved his regional strategic goal, if only at a high price.

The next level on the 3D chess board is the continent of Europe and NATO. Here there are five major powers, each with its own strategic goals: Russia, France, Germany, Britain, and the United States.

At the European level, the Ukraine war has disastrously backfired against Russia. It has driven European countries back into the sheltering arms of the United States, and it has frightened Russia's neighbors Sweden and Finland into seeking admission to NATO. When the Cold War ended peacefully, Mikhail Gorbachev promoted the idea of a "common European home" that would unite Western and Eastern Europe with Russia in a shared institutional framework—and would exclude the United States. This possibility was foreclosed by the expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe over Russian objections, and now the backlash against the Russian invasion of Ukraine may have made Russia a pariah state in the eyes of most Europeans—though not necessarily in non-European eyes—for years or decades to come.

The Ukraine war, by underscoring Europe's security dependence on the United States, has also reduced France's influence in the region. Regardless of domestic politics, the French foreign policy establishment since de Gaulle has usually sought to build up a tightly integrated European bloc under French and German leadership with a high degree of independence from the U.S. and China. But while some Americans would welcome more European self-sufficiency in defense, the Ukraine war is likely to drive an expansion of the U.S.-led NATO alliance in the near future.

Germany is another loser as a result of the war in Ukraine. Since its post-Cold War reunification, Germany has tried to be a chamber of commerce disguised as a country. The Germans imported cheap oil and gas from Russia to power factories exporting goods to China and the rest of the world, all while free-riding on U.S. defense spending. Thanks to sanctions against Russian

imports and the destruction of the Nord Stream gas pipelines, Germany's energy supply base has been violently reoriented to North America, with a growing percentage of its natural gas now coming over the Atlantic to replace former Russian supplies. Germany has been resisting American pressure to decouple economically from China, but over time Berlin may submit to Washington. In the 2030s Germany may be more of a subordinate American satellite than it has been since the beginnings of Ostpolitik in the 1960s.

In the European theater of power politics, the U.S. has emerged for the time being as the winner. U.S. victory has come at the expense of Russian relations with Europe, French dreams of an autonomous Europe, and German hopes to be simultaneously on good terms with Russia, China, and the U.S. The first secretary general of NATO, Lord Ismay, is often quoted as saying that the purpose of NATO was to "keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down." For the foreseeable future, NATO, which integrates the U.S. into European security policy-making, will expand in membership and resources. Meanwhile, the European Union has lost the United Kingdom as a result of Brexit and is considered illegitimate by many nationalists in Eastern Europe and many populists in Western Europe. If Cold War II continues, American hegemony over most of Europe is likely to deepen, as the influence of the civilian EU diminishes. And Britain, America's closest European partner and an ardent supporter of Ukraine, may be counted as a winner in the geopolitics of the Ukraine war as well.

What about the global level of the 3D chess game? Here there are only two major players: the U.S. and China.

China's per capita income, like that of the late Soviet Union, is below that of the U.S. and its major allies. But by any reasonable definition, China is a superpower like the U.S. or, to use military jargon, a "peer competitor." Unlike the Soviet Union, China is a superpower in multiple dimensions: economic, military, and diplomatic.

In purchasing power parity (PPP), China has already surpassed the U.S.

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BY LIEL LEIBOVITZ



as the world's largest economy, and will almost certainly surpass it soon by the other important measure, market exchange rates. Nor is the size of China's economy merely a reflection of a large population, as in the case of India. China is catching up in silicon chip technology, rivals the West in quantum computing and supercomputing, and has its own artificial intelligence and space programs.

Firms of Chinese origin like TikTok and Huawei have gone global, while a single Chinese firm, DJI, manufactures a majority of the civilian drones sold worldwide—and a majority of those used in American state and local law enforcement. After the COVID-19 epidemic originated in China, possibly leaking from a Chinese virology laboratory, the U.S. and other countries discovered how utterly dependent they were on Chinese factories and facilities manufacturing drugs and drug precursors and personal protective equipment (PPE). It may be a matter of time before Chinese firms compete in the aerospace

and automobile industries. And China produces more steel than all other countries in the world combined.

What about China's military? In 2016, President Barack Obama boasted: "We spend more on our military than the next eight nations combined."

But this was misleading, because it was based on market exchange rates, a less accurate measure than purchasing power parity—according to which American defense spending is only equal to that of China and Russia combined. And even purchasing power parity measures may be overestimating American military strength. The French scholar Jacques Sapir has argued that American economic statistics inflate "paper" sectors like finance and real estate, and disguise areas important for national strategy in which the U.S. is at a disadvantage compared to China or Russia, like manufacturing and mining.

In diplomacy, too, China is now the second superpower. In the last generation the Beijing regime has

systematically built a parallel set of global institutions that exclude the U.S. from membership. One is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), founded in 2001 by China, Russia, and four former Soviet republics: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. This pact, excluding the U.S., has grown to include India and Iran.

Then there is the Chinese-led Pacific trade organization, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which excludes the U.S. but includes American allies Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, among other countries. By its own choice the U.S. is not represented in another Chinese creation, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which now has 106 member nations, including Britain and numerous other countries in Europe. Step by step, China is creating global organizations that exclude the U.S. as a member. ■

*This article was originally published on March 14, 2023.*

ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

# The Suckers' Revolt

Israelis who work, fight in the army, and pay taxes  
are wary of the new government

BY NOAM MAITAL

I was standing with thousands of Israelis at the Tel Aviv station, waiting to board a train to Jerusalem for a planned protest outside the Knesset. If you know Israelis, you know that neither standing in line nor waiting patiently are among our strong suits. But on Feb. 15, 2023, when the national protests started to gain momentum, I felt a reassuring calm in the crowd. We boarded the train and stood shoulder to shoulder clutching our Israeli flags for the 30-minute ride. The

protest was purposely scheduled on a Wednesday, a workday. Beside me was a man who had taken the day off work and brought his 7-year-old son.

Once the train arrived in Jerusalem, we poured out into the streets on our way to the Knesset and were met immediately by voices shouting at us from the apartment buildings above. People yelled "get out of this country" and "you're not wanted here." The insults infuriated us and served as further justification for our demonstrations.

When we reached the large stage set

a few hundred feet from the Knesset, I looked around to find myself in a sea of thousands of blue and white Israeli flags waving in the crisp Jerusalem breeze, and I was suddenly overcome by a feeling of desperation and anxiety about where our country was headed and the long-simmering divisions that seem to be blowing us apart.

I grew up in Haifa with academic parents who made aliyah from the U.S. in 1967. The youngest of four siblings, I grew up in a family infused with Zionist values. All of my brothers went to elite units in the army. When I was 13, I started running on the beach and training with one of them to prepare for the admissions tests for Sayeret Matkal, the top special forces unit in the IDF, modeled after the British Special Air Service. The exams were five years away, but I knew how challenging they would be. I made it into Sayeret Matkal, and later continued in another intelligence unit. In both, I was a member of close-knit teams that followed their

commanders through the most difficult challenges with complete trust. I have put my life at risk for Israel, even when the government made choices that were at odds with my political ideology. The saying goes that the army is above politics. It's our rock and our unifying common ground.

Only a profound disruption could have threatened that solemn bond. Former Prime Minister Ehud Barak, an alumnus of Matkal himself, and one of the country's most decorated soldiers, stated at a protest that just as soldiers have a duty to refuse illegal orders, citizens are obligated to resist an illegitimate government. He said: "We have a social contract around liberal democracy, as defined in the Declaration of Independence. We don't have a social contract with a dictator." He encouraged the Israeli public to resist what he considers the impending dictatorship that could grow out of the proposed judicial reform, "with all the legitimate means at their disposal."

In the past few weeks, more of our most decorated soldiers—pilots, former Mossad directors, retired generals, cyber security units—have voiced their concerns in great numbers about the upcoming "reform," asserting that if this "contract" is broken, they will not show up for reserve duty. During the second week of March, 37 of 40 reserve F-15 pilots from the IAF's famed 69th Squadron, known as the Hammers, said they would boycott one day of training in protest of the judicial overhaul. They said they were afraid they would be commanded to carry out illegal actions, such as Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich's call for the government to "wipe out" the Palestinian village of Huwara.

But back on the stage in front of the Knesset, opposition leaders (representative of the parties in the minority), took turns giving speeches against what they believe will be the disastrous consequences of this reform. Each offered a different nuance to his or her message. Yair Lapid, head of the opposition and the leader of Yesh Atid, the second-largest political party in Israel, was working hard to portray himself as the person in control of the anti-reform movement. His next in line, Benny Gantz, head

**"The burdens of citizenship seem to fall more heavily on the one-third of the population who work, fight in the army, and pay heavy taxes to support those who don't."**

of the Mamlachti Party, tried to take a more statesmanlike position, calling for dialogue between the coalition and the opposition. As the various politicians had their say, I noticed that each received boos from different sections of the crowd. After a few minutes, it dawned on me that the protesters gathered here, over 200,000 strong, didn't seem to share a political ideology. What brought us all here is our desire to live in a functioning democracy.

I met my future wife at the end of my military service, when I was fortunate enough to be selected to join a Birthright trip. I completed my undergraduate degree in Boston and then we both spent several years working in New York. Moving back to Israel, I co-founded Waycare, a startup that uses AI to improve traffic safety in cities and towns. Soon after raising venture capital, we moved back to the U.S. so I could scale the company in the U.S. market. Three years later, the company was acquired.

It was time to return home. Although my wife and I knew before we got married that we would raise our children in Israel, it wasn't the easiest thing to board that plane at LAX after four years in LA and head for Ben-Gurion Airport with our two young children. My wife is an American, without previous ties to

Israel, and as a dual citizen myself the temptations of an easier life in the U.S. were clear.

I was well acquainted with the difficulties of living in Israel—its Kafkaesque bureaucracy, the frankness bordering on rudeness, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and extreme segregation between ethnic and religious groups, to name a few. Also, the burdens of citizenship seem to fall more heavily on the one-third of the population who work, fight in the army, and pay heavy taxes to support those who don't. You'll sometimes hear us call ourselves, self-mockingly, the "frayerim," or the "suckers." And now the so-called "justice reform" of the far-right religious coalition is trying to make our burden even heavier.

Israel has a parliamentary system with three branches—executive, legislative, and judicial. In Israel the executive and legislative branches are essentially joined at the hip; the governing coalition nominates the members of the executive branch and the executive controls the legislation in our Knesset through its majority. The courts are the only branch that is independent of the other two. Nearly all countries have written constitutions that protect basic human rights and values. But Israel is one of only six countries that do not have such a constitution. Israel instead relies on its system of checks and balances to ensure its democratic nature.

Is it perfect? Far from it. But the current system has allowed Israel, for over 75 years, to thrive as the only democratic country in the Middle East. Moreover, Israel was founded as a country that defends the sacred rights of freedom and equality for all. Our founding father David Ben-Gurion read aloud these words on the day of Israel's Declaration of Independence on May 14, 1948: "The state of Israel will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective

of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture.”

The judicial “reform” would dramatically alter the balance of power between the judiciary and the executive and legislative branches, and essentially allow a majority-rule government to govern without offering any protections for minorities. At this point, the magnitude of the threat may seem theoretical, so I’d like to give some concrete examples of how this “reform” could tear Israel apart. One of the “reforms” states that any basic law (*hok yesod*, in Hebrew) can be signed into law with only a simple majority—61 votes in the Knesset, and it also prevents the Supreme Court from intervening in that establishment. How could this new proposal undermine Israel as a liberal democracy? For one, the government is trying, for the second time, to pass a law that would allow Knesset member Aryeh Deri, a convicted criminal, to serve as a minister for this government. While Prime Minister Netanyahu appointed him interior and health minister of the government sworn in last month, the High Court ruled that allowing Deri, the head of the religious party Shas, to assume a cabinet post was “unreasonable in the extreme,” due to his past criminal convictions. So, the judicial reformers cooked up a new provision, an even more sinister law, that prohibits judicial review of the appointment of ministers, no matter what the circumstances. Meaning, according to the justice “reform,” convicted felons, rapists, murderers, all are kosher to serve as ministers in our Israeli government.

Furthermore, under the ticking clock of the rushed changes, the Knesset has already brought to a preliminary vote the “*hametz* (leavened bread) rule” which would require hospitals to prevent people from bringing *hametz* into the hospital during Passover. In line with this rule, Smotrich, the finance minister, has said that he supports allowing business owners to turn away customers if serving them conflicts with their religious beliefs. This would allow a doctor to refuse to care for a baby with gay parents or allow a hospital to withhold bread from an Israeli

Arab during Passover. These changes would undermine the very character of the country Ben-Gurion envisioned.

The vast majority of the demonstrators have served in the IDF—the melting pot of Israeli society. The same cannot be said of the coalition party leadership. Most never served in the IDF, but rather spent those years studying in a yeshiva. This brings us to an even more egregious abuse of power that could be deemed legal if the reform passes—our Conscription Law. Under this law, every 18-year-old must serve in the Israel Defense Forces. Yes, there are myriad exemptions today that address religious Jews who want to delay their army service to study in a yeshiva. Or the nuanced exemption for Israeli Arabs who often carry a dual identity of Palestinian and Israeli. However, the ultra-Orthodox seek to rewrite the law in such a way that would automatically exempt thousands of yeshiva students from military service.

In 2017, the Supreme Court struck down a 2015 law passed by the then right-wing government that largely exempted yeshiva students. The High Court struck it down by arguing it failed to treat citizens equally. If the current Knesset amended the law to allow this exemption, under the judicial “reform,” the Supreme Court would not be allowed to take up the legality of the law under any circumstances.

In essence, these changes would forever subordinate the individual rights of citizens to the whims of the majority party. In turn, the nature of that majority is rightly concerning to anyone who believes in democratic norms. Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir was not allowed to join the IDF because of his radical anti-Arab views, and was convicted of racist incitement against Arabs and for supporting Kach, a group included on terror lists in both Israel and the United States. He was famously interviewed in his home on whose wall hung a picture of Baruch Goldstein, the Jewish terrorist who killed 29 Muslims and wounded 125, at the Cave of the Patriarchs in 1994, mowing down Muslims at prayer with an automatic rifle. Ben-Gvir recently “liked” a tweet by his radical counterpart Minister of

Finance Smotrich to “wipe out” the village of Huwara after a Palestinian terrorist gunned down two Jewish Israeli brothers caught in traffic in the Palestinian town. Smotrich later clarified that he didn’t mean in his tweet that the village should be wiped out by civilians—but rather by the military. These are the people to whose whims all Israelis will be subject if this “reform” passes.

As the founder of a startup and current investor in a leading venture capital fund that invests in Israel startups, I am also deeply concerned about the economic impact of this “reform.” The flight of capital from Israel is already well underway and the effects could be disastrous. Israel’s shekel-dollar exchange rate has plummeted 12.5%, from 3.20 per dollar in August 2022 to 3.60 in February 2023. This has made imports more expensive at a time when the cost of living has also been soaring. Furthermore, every day I hear about another founder deciding to move his money out of Israel. In a recent survey conducted by Adam Fisher, a partner at Bessemer, one of the leading venture capital funds in the world, and Michal Zur, president of the startup Kultura, 90% of the entrepreneurs and managers of high-tech companies say that if they had to reestablish their companies today, they would register them outside of Israel. Israel’s high-tech sector, its economic growth engine, is fueled by foreign investors who bring their money into Israel. Without such funding, Israel’s economy will wither. The desert will no longer bloom.

Dr. Ilan Samish, CEO of Amai Proteins, was invited to speak before the Law and Justice Constitution Committee and pleaded with the committee to stop the “reform”: “Please, don’t scare my investors and force me to transfer Amai Proteins to Amai Proteins Delaware while removing taxes and employment from Israel,” he said. On March 12, several former Finance Ministry officials announced, “We anticipate severe damage to the Israeli economy, with the first indications already visible today,” and urged Finance Minister Smotrich to halt the government’s controversial judicial overhaul, saying it would “severely and irreversibly damage the

Israeli economy.” Tom Livne, founder of the \$2 billion unicorn startup Verbit, which provides accurate transcriptions using automatic speech recognition, is moving his family, company, and his money abroad and calls for other high-tech stalwarts to follow suit.

A member of my former unit, a generation older than me, who has been a leader in these protests, spoke out one day about what was motivating him. He made four points to the crowd: 1) Like in the Army, we’re all united regardless of our individual political beliefs. 2) We’re fighting for our homes, our values, and the future of our grandchildren. 3) We can no longer accept the fact that the Orthodox are not working, not serving, and not paying taxes, but using us as their debit cards. 4) Israel shall remain a democracy—and we’ll fight for it to the end.

Don’t be misled by claims from the government or even American journals that these protests are the result of foreign provocation or American dollars, that the U.S. is involved in an elaborate covert strategy to pressure the current Israeli government to subdue its extreme factions, or that our homegrown insistence that the government respect our basic rights and values is part of a bigger American plot to get Iran back to the JCPOA negotiating table, by distracting Israel from any attempts to sabotage the American effort.

No. I have been marching and protesting as these protests manifested themselves as a grassroots movement of ordinary people who are fighting for the future of our country. Young and old, Mizrahi and Ashkenazi, women and men, it’s clear as daylight that this fight is different from other battles—it’s not about political ideology but rather a demand that we protect and maintain the only thing that holds us all together—our democracy.

While there is hope that this government sobers up and steps toward the negotiating table, many people are starting to imagine a once unthinkable reality: The “reform” will be etched into law. It will immediately be challenged in the courts. Likely, the Supreme Court will then strike down the reform, putting the IDF, Shin Bet, the police, and every citizen in this country between a

rock and hard place. Should they follow the courts and rule of law or the government? This will be a constitutional crisis.

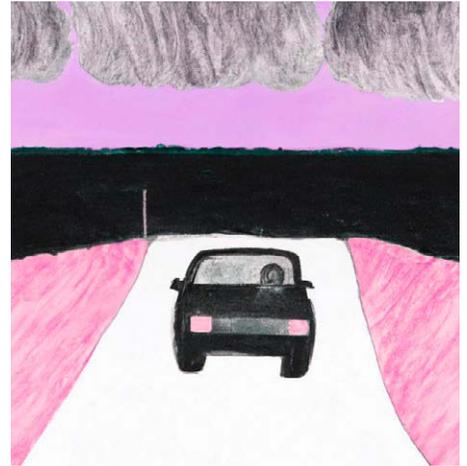
I’m not sure it’s consoling, but Israel is unlike most countries in the world in that existential threats are etched into our DNA. Since its foundation, we have faced many of them: the 1948 War of Independence, the Six-Day War in 1967, Yom Kippur War in 1973, First Lebanon War in 1982, Second Lebanon War in 2006, first and second intifadas, and many more in between. The bitter joke is that like the Olympics we can count on a war with Gaza every four years. Hotels in Israel even build that scenario into their pricing models to account for summers with lower tourism due to the frequent conflicts. I’d like to say we will surely surmount this threat, too. But it seems that the worst may be happening—the prime minister may have lost control of the coalition he put together to save his own skin.

March 1 was a watershed turning point. In a “day of disruption,” protesters tried to block the Ayalon highway in Tel Aviv; police used stun grenades, mounted police, and water cannons against the demonstrators, and arrested several people, including a former combat pilot who had been shot down in the Yom Kippur War and held as a POW in Syria. Shame on the government.

We have learned through tragic experience that we must never imagine we are invulnerable. Professor Yuval Harari was interviewed Friday on prime time television and when asked about President Herzog’s fears that Israel was approaching the point of no return he replied: “We have already reached it—there is no going back. It is possible to advance to a dictatorship. It is possible we move toward a stronger democracy. But it is impossible to go back to Nov. 22nd, 2022. Things have happened that have completely changed the situation. I hope that the shock will bring us to a better place, to a stronger democracy.”

I share his hope—and that’s why I’ll be back out on the streets every week to protest until it happens. ■

*This article was originally published on March 14, 2023.*



## Album of the Week

### Я стану краще, *When We Were Together*

To get a sense of just how varied the sounds of Ukraine are these days, it’s worth checking out the band Я стану краще, which translates to “I Will Get Better.” If you think that sounds like a particularly emo name to call a band, you’re right. I Will Get Better’s latest, a five-track EP titled *Коли ми були разом*, or *When We Were Together*, is a delightful quick hit that showcases how Midwestern emo has crossed borders that even the Russian army cannot touch.

The foursome have a sound that calls to mind emo heroes like Braid and Algernon Cadwallader. Lead singer Andriy Bychkovskyi starts off the opening track, “Інстаграм,” or “Instagram,” with a quick “Woo!” and then the band is off to the races. Oleksii Ostrovskii on guitar and Anton Kukoviakin on bass make a tight and knotty string section, and the two chime in with charming background vocals as well. They give a slightly ramshackle, homey feel to the whole enterprise. They sound like they’re recording in the garage next door, as opposed to in the middle of war.

It’s a five-track, 10-minute EP made by self-described “intellectuals who play punk rock and are sad.” It’s a little bit of fun about being sad in a moment when being sad feels very serious.

—David Meir Grossman

## THE REST

→ **Chinese billionaire Guo Wengui, an outspoken critic of Beijing and prominent ally of longtime Donald Trump ally Steve Bannon, was arrested on Wednesday in Manhattan** after federal prosecutors accused him of defrauding thousands of people out of more than \$1 billion in a complex investment scheme. In an unsealed indictment, prosecutors say Wengui used nonprofit organizations he had founded, which were critical of the Chinese government, “to amass followers” who were inclined to believe in his investment advice. Bannon at one time served on the board of directors for one of those nonprofits, called the Rule of Law Foundation. Bannon, who was not charged in this case, was arrested in 2020—on a yacht belonging to Wengui—for his alleged fraud in a fundraiser for building a wall along the U.S. southern border.

→ **Quote of the Week: “We take patients who are going to die of their diseases within a three-month period of time, and we force them into a denial and appeals process that lasts up to 2.5 years. ... So what happens is the appeal outlasts the beneficiary.”** That’s top executive of Bronx, New York’s Calvary Hospital Chris Comfort explaining how artificial intelligence models are being used to game patient’s conditions so that long bureaucratic denial processes will outlast their terminal illnesses, according to a new investigation from news outlet STAT. Some 31 million Americans are currently enrolled in the Medicare alternative known as Medicare Advantage, and many are running into problems with the unregulated software used by MA to create personalized care plans that critics say leave elderly patients in bitter disputes with insurance agents while they go broke paying for critical treatments out of pocket. Insurance officials say the medical providers are not required to use the algorithmic suggestions, but “it ends up being a hard-and-fast rule,” said David Lipschutz from patient-advocacy group Center for Medicare Advocacy. “There’s no deviation from it, no accounting for changes in condition.”

→ An unmanned **American military drone crashed into the Black Sea after a collision with Russian fighter jets** on Tuesday. “Several times before the collision, the [Russian jets] dumped fuel on and flew in front of the [drone] in a reckless, environmentally unsound and unprofessional manner,” U.S. European Command wrote in a statement. The episode was the most recent incident in what EUCOM described as “a pattern of dangerous actions by Russian pilots while interacting with U.S. and Allied aircraft over international airspace.”

→ Israeli Prime Minister **Benjamin Netanyahu said his administration could possibly step in to aid Israeli companies with exposure to the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank.** “We have an obligation, of course, to try to protect these companies, whose main operations are in Israel and will remain in Israel, and also their employees,” he said over the weekend, offering a subtle jab to the tech startup executives who’ve threatened to pull their business out of Israel in protest of his government’s controversial judicial reforms. Though some Israeli tech companies dealt with the SVB branch in Tel Aviv, others had relations with the closed California headquarters directly, leaving **an unclear picture of Israel’s exposure to the collapse.**

## THE BIG STORY

Describing Russia’s invasion of Ukraine “as a territorial dispute,” Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis said in a statement broadcast on Tucker Carlson’s show on Monday night that “becoming further entangled in a territorial dispute between Ukraine and Russia is not [a vital national interest].” The sharp critique of President Biden’s foreign policy puts DeSantis, a likely frontrunner for the 2024 GOP nomination, in close alignment with Carlson himself, who’s been one of the most outspoken opponents of U.S. support for Ukraine. It also serves as a break with many of the leading GOP candidates and top Republican lawmakers, Republican Senator and Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and former Vice President Mike Pence included, who’ve said Biden should more aggressively back Ukraine.

DeSantis putting daylight between himself and the rest of the field of potential GOP candidates moves him closer to the antiwar position staked out by frontrunner Donald Trump, who’s been aggressively arguing for a peace deal while out on the campaign trail. At a rally in Iowa on Monday, Trump won the crowd with commentary on culture war issues like transgender rules in sports and critical race theory in schools but his jabs against DeSantis fell flat.

—Sean Cooper

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# 'Ritual, Even as an Atheist, Has Enormous Power'

A roundtable discussion with Jewish atheists about observing religious traditions, maintaining cultural attachments, and even praying—without a belief in God

BY ABIGAIL POGREBIN

**T**wenty-seven percent of Jewish adults do not identify with the Jewish religion, according to the 2020 Pew Research Center study. They identify as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular” religiously. That’s up from 22% from the 2013 Pew study.

It may not be a revelation that large swaths of the Jewish population have strong Jewish identity without belief. I personally hear it all the time: “I feel deeply Jewish, but don’t believe in God.” But it would be facile and inaccurate to assume that nonbelievers opt out of ritual, text study, acts in the name of *tikkun olam*, community involvement, even prayer. So even though the two recent Pew studies confirm that a large and growing number of Jewish Americans call themselves atheists, or say they have “no religion,” the picture is more complicated.

We set out to understand the real-world Jewish experience of self-described nonbelievers—including one Conservative rabbi (here using the pseudonym Aaron, because he is not publicly known as an atheist to his congregants)—who care deeply about being Jewish. Some were atheists from the start, some lost their faith more recently. The 12 participants in our discussion don’t necessarily love the label “atheist,” and might not ordinarily use it to describe themselves, but they

were all comfortable enough to participate under that umbrella term for this roundtable.

We asked whether Jewish life is welcoming, meaningful, and interesting to connected, committed Jews—those for whom God doesn’t work?

## THE PARTICIPANTS

Their ages and locations

**Karen:** 75, New York City

**Lee:** 50, California

**Leah:** 66, Houston

**Nancy:** 77, Los Angeles

**Irene:** 64, Chicago

**Sxdni:** 51. *“I’m coming to you from occupied land of many tribes and nations, also known as Wisconsin.”*

**Francis:** 42, Cape Cod, Massachusetts

**Jennifer:** 44, Seattle

**Marsha:** 42, Hoboken, New Jersey

**Aaron:** 50, California

**Judy:** 55, New Jersey

**David:** 58, Deerfield, Illinois

**Tablet:** How do you identify? Maybe the word “atheist” is what you use, maybe it’s “nonbeliever”—whatever language is appropriate.

**Irene:** I identify as a secular Jew. But if I’m talking with non-Jewish people, I may either identify as Jewish or atheist.

**Nancy:** I identify as Jewish. The word “atheist” I never used. It hasn’t really come up. But I’m very Jewish. Atheism doesn’t mean you’re not religious or

have no religion or are not deeply committed to it.

**Francis:** I identify as Jewish, humanist, religious naturalist. “Atheist” is subject to definition, obviously, but certainly, if we’re defining God as some sort of conscious entity, then yes, I’m at least a teapot agnostic.

**Judy:** My word is mostly “atheist.” At times it’s been agnostic.

**David:** I identify as a very religious, secular, humanistic Jew. Occasionally, I also identify as ignostic.

**Jennifer:** Very similar to Nancy, I call myself Jewish. If I’m getting into deep conversations, I say atheist, but I rarely do.

**Marsha:** I use “atheist” or Jewish.

**Aaron:** I am a deeply committed and observant, traditional, spiritual Jew who questions just about everything about what might be behind the curtain.

**Sxdni:** My words are atheist, pagan, humanist, secular humanist, Jewish witch.

**Karen:** I tend to identify as a Jewish nonbeliever. I avoid “atheist” because it sounds just as dogmatic as anybody who touts God. But I don’t know what the word “God” means, and any definition I’ve heard doesn’t ring true to me. So I don’t go there; I stay in this space—which is very undefined—of “nonbeliever.”

**Lee:** I grew up as a socialist, secular humanist, but very culturally Jewish—in Israel and in America. And so I now say, “I used to be mostly agnostic, leaning atheist, and now I’m mostly atheist, leaning agnostic.”

**Leah:** I’m a gender-queer lesbian and I identify as Jewish because I’m ethnically 100% Jewish; it’s utterly who I am. And I can add that I spent 30 years of my life as a Hasidic Jew. I was a teacher in yeshiva for 14 of those years. As an atheist today and someone who departed from that life, I have to acknowledge how deeply I am imprinted by my experiences. That being said, I eschew labels and categories because they’re all too hard around the edges and they never define human experience.

**Tablet:** What connects you all to Jewish life these days?

**David:** Judaism is as endemic to me as my physical self. I am Jewish because

I am part of this family. I am also extremely involved—my wife would say too involved—in our congregation, and I have had a wide variety of roles, including—we don’t call it president, but president of the congregation. I taught Sunday school for 21 years, I sing in a choir, all sorts of things like that. And learning, study, and teaching—I’m very much aware of and connected to both Jewish and non-Jewish topics, but religion in particular.

**Aaron:** Nearly everything in my life is informed by, limited by, enhanced by, amplified by my Jewish identity, Jewish connections, Jewish sense of obligation. My Judaism informs how and where I do my work, how I organize my family’s time, my fears and hopes for the future of the world and the Jewish people.

**Francis:** I maintain a membership in my local Reform synagogue. I keep kosher and observe some of the major holidays. In a deeper way, I try to filter philosophical issues and current events through Jewish literature, which could be the Tanach, Felix Adler, or Jerry Seinfeld. The word “Israel” means wrestling with things; wrestling and thinking deep, that’s a very Jewish thing. That’s the biggest way I’m Jewish.

**Karen:** I find that at this stage of my life, my connection to Jewish activity is a little more tenuous. I live alone, and without others around me engaging in ritual and observance at home, it doesn’t feel right doing it all by myself. So I arrange, when and if I can, to have some together-activity with family or friends. I maintain membership at a synagogue. I watch hours of JBS, which is the Jewish television network, and last night, for example, I went to the Center for Jewish History for a lecture on Jewish citizenship in the United States. I do Torah study at least once a week. I find that the Torah provides me with a kind of a Rorschach test: where I’ve come from, where we’ve come from, dysfunction that we deal with, hopes and aspirations. I leave out the beliefs.

**Leah:** Abby, is your question how do I engage with my Jewish life?

**Tablet:** I’m asking, essentially: How do you do Jewish?

“I avoid ‘atheist’ because it sounds just as dogmatic as anybody who touts God ... I stay in this space—which is very undefined—of ‘nonbeliever.’”

**Leah:** First, I’ve allowed my Jewishness—background and history—to inform almost all of my creative work. Second: Being a product of a family of refugees, I wanted to know who we were, so I’ve been doing a lot of genealogical research. Third: I have struggled to find a place where I can comfortably acknowledge how my deep religious training in the Hasidic community shaped me in so many ways—in Jewish core values, and the fact that ritual, even as an atheist, has enormous power. Rituals are powerful, myths are powerful. I have allowed myself to go back to them.

**Jennifer:** I teach Sunday school. I’ve been learning more about Jewish history, Israel’s history and its current events—and trying not to get them clouded by varied biased sources. I work in the Jewish community and have worked in Jewish nonprofits for a long time.

**Nancy:** I see that my deeper Jewish education is happening more now than it ever has before. Though I have long been a Reform Jew in LA, with a lot of wonderful community and synagogue participation, my husband and I are big supporters of a new congregation in Los Angeles called Nefesh; it’s quite wonderful. I find myself going to services online a lot, I take Mussar classes

with the rabbi. There are also classes happening that bring the Jewish people to anti-racist work. I also run a foundation and we just gave an anniversary party for all our grantees, many of whom are not Jewish, but Judaism is very important in how we do our work in the foundation. I have a lot of connections to the arts in Israel, and that’s really important to me as a way to connect with Israel, because it’s fraught.

**Marsha:** Until very recently I have been disconnected from not just Jewish life, but connection to the Jewish world. I’m an atheist in New York, which is a very popular opinion among most people I know. But I would say that since having my son two years ago, I’ve definitely been trying to connect more to the traditions rather than religion. So I started implementing—over the last couple of years—celebrating the holidays with him. I don’t believe in saying blessings, but, for instance, we sing songs when we light candles. We like Jewish music. Another way I connect is that my best friend is studying to be a rabbi, and I have a lot more conversations with her nowadays about the history; I’m much more curious about it. I’m feeling much more confident in my position as an atheist Jew these days, so I’m much more comfortable trying to learn more about it without feeling the religious aspect of it shoved down my throat.

**Sxdni:** I am a member of a Reform shul locally, and I help edit, proof, and write for the shul’s newsletter. I was just at midrash class earlier today. I just recently started getting involved with Respectability, which is a national Jewish-centric nonprofit focusing on disability and health conditions. As someone who has always been marginalized, as a person with an invisible disability, as a neuro-queer, gender-queer, trans and non-binary Jewish person, I’ve always been kind of on the outside, and my Jewishness is also a part of that. All those things meld together with me. It’s just part of who I am and also my social values: *tikkun olam*, repair the world. That’s very important to me as someone who is a member of many marginalized groups, including being Jewish.

**Judy:** I believe in the Jewish concept of repairing the world. So I do charity

work, and I try to help people I know around me who are struggling. I like to make the holidays in a very culturally Jewish way; I do Rosh Hashanah, Passover, I make hamantaschen for Purim. And I enjoy being culturally Jewish.

**Lee:** I'm an actor, poet, and writer, so even my work that is not Jewish content is Jewish content—in terms of the values. I look at the idea of *tikkun olam* and social justice as being woven together in a way that is uniquely Jewish in my work. While I was in the arts, when I was much younger, I was a civil rights lawyer and I was almost always the only Jewish person in the room. I wasn't that identified with being Jewish at the time, but the reason why I was doing that work came, in part, out of Jewish values and Jewish culture, so I started actually sharing my Jewish identity with people. It really connected me to a whole community that I'm still part of, even though I no longer practice law. I've also spent many years teaching, and my style, my way of talking, thinking, my humor, all of those things—who I'm showing up as in those rooms—is as a Jewish person.

**Irene:** One of the big ways that I *do* Jewish is I belong to a humanistic congregation, and I'm fairly involved in that. I was on our steering committee; I taught Sunday school for a couple of years. I celebrate Jewish holidays. I always do it my way: I wrote my own Haggadah back when I was in grade school, and I kept revising it, because the one my grandfather used just didn't really speak to me. I always seek out the Jewishness wherever I am; it resonates with me.

**Tablet:** Please raise your hand if you go to synagogue—not necessarily belong formally as a member, but go?

[Ten out of 12 raise their hands.]

**Tablet:** How many keep kosher?

[Aaron and Francis raise their hands; David and Karen raise their hands halfway.]

**David:** I'm an ethical, moral vegetarian, so I am a default kosher.

**Karen:** I maintain what's called eco-kosher. Which, I think, is basically the same thing that David is talking about.

**Tablet:** How many of you belong to, or go regularly to, a JCC—for Jewish events, not just the gym or the pool?

[No hands are raised.]

**Tablet:** Now to a tougher question: Why do you believe there is no God?

**Judy:** Simply: the Holocaust. I don't understand how there could be a Holocaust and 6 million Jews be murdered and there be a God.

**David:** The question of whether there is or is not a God is an irrelevant question to me. If there is a God or if there is not a God, our behavior, our choices are our own. And we know the kind of choices that are pro-social—that help people get along. *Human beings* create pain, pleasure, progress, or destruction. And so my belief or nonbelief is really—I get very Jewish on this—it's about behavior rather than belief.

**Aaron:** Everything I study from within the religion points me to attaching to a heavenly being, a sentience, a will, a plan. And nearly everything I study from science and anthropology and cosmology helps me understand that nearly everything that any person—in particular, a Jew—would or could say about God is some kind of a projection, much of it motivated by the highest and loftiest aspirations for what a human being could possibly aspire to, but crafted deep within the human urge to make meaning and not necessarily to reify what is actually out there.

**Tablet:** What's the projection?

**Aaron:** I think that it emerges from the need to make sense of a chaotic universe—to make something that is impossibly large feel containable, and then to project the impossible largeness of it onto another being in whose presence we might feel properly humble and small. I think that it ultimately gives a lot of order, meaning and tremendous amount of beauty to the world. And I live with all that in mind and try to do it better the next day than before, but with healthy dollops of cynicism about the origins of those ideas.

**Leah:** I had lived many years in the Hasidic world with a really intimate sense of God as a friend, in conversation on a daily basis: "What do you want of me? Let me do it." But I had to confront the fact that if I believed in that God, then I didn't really have a right to exist as a lesbian, as a gender-queer person. I could be sort of *tolerated*, and that was about

it. Coming to understand who I was and that my sexuality was the most joyous, real, and self-fulfilling thing in my life, it was the most holy thing. It wasn't something to be tolerated. And that threw everything else into question.

**Tablet:** You also told me that you became uncomfortable with what you described as Judaism's "denial of death." What do you mean by that?

**Leah:** Everything around me in my Haredi life was a denial of death: We were taught the soul lives forever; don't mention the C-word (cancer) or anything about death. Funerals were always an assurance that the person didn't really die. A lot of religion was about avoiding that sense of being a blip in the universe and being irrelevant. And I decided that what I really wanted to have was the courage to live honestly. And that meant walking around with a question mark in front of me all the time; that became my replacement for God. I decided that when you say there is a clearly defined God and God becomes a sentient being, then people want a relationship with that sentient being, and they say, "How can I please you? How can I not please you?" And they start to use human biases to define that. And people like me start to be hurt and denied, put aside. So I committed to no labels and to no clarity as to a being.

**Jennifer:** Language and storytelling is a *human* creation. The idea that most people have about God is a *story*. I don't know how humans could have really figured out how we all got here. I think that people were sitting around a fire and throwing out ideas of how we got here; that is the story that we all now believe is God. I know some people say God is all around us, so they've changed the interpretation of what the word God means. And I can get what the idea of God is to some: our world and the beauty around us. Well, I don't think that's really God. That is an appreciation for us existing in this world. But this world is one thing, God is another: It is a story that we've created. If you ascribe to this God that many of the world agrees with, and you get on board with the stories that come along with it—then all of this is "meant to be," a predetermined thing by this God, God

is leading us. If you think that God is the answer to *why*—so that, in addition to the beauty in your life, God also explains the bad things, the inequality ... If you exist in your home because God blessed you with it ... I'm sorry, I hate the word "blessed." Everybody thinks they're so "blessed." Well, no. It's luck. It is so obnoxiously privileged to believe that you were blessed with your good fortune and that other people who live in poverty or who are dealing with injustices, they somehow aren't good enough to be blessed. The ideas that come with that God, to me just seem bonkers, unfair, and wrong. So even if I somehow maybe believed in God, it's not something I'd want to ascribe to.

**Marsha:** What Jennifer was saying kind of triggered the way that I feel about this: I cannot square God with the injustice—having some people be lucky enough because God is watching over you and taking care of you, making sure you're blessed versus other people living in poverty—well, they're not blessed by God and have to suffer because there's a greater purpose to all of this? I was engaged to a guy in my early life who decided, after some time of us being together, that he wanted to become a religious Jew, and started changing everything about our lives and wanted me to have lots of kids and stay home from work. I often asked him, "How are we going to afford this?" He said, "God will provide." That's sort of the beginning of the end of my religious beliefs. "Show me proof that God is going to provide for us. Show me proof that God is watching over our house and therefore we're making all these stupid decisions for our lives because you have a feeling that somebody's speaking to you from above." I've never—in a single moment in my entire life—felt any being greater than myself, than my morals, my values. The reasons why I do things have nothing to do with God. It's not to say anything bad about people who believe, but to me it's blind acceptance of something that you have absolutely no proof of. That bothers me.

**Karen:** I was once with a group of people who were very religious-minded, talking about God and prayer and God's will for them, and I sort of zoned out.

**"The reasons why I do things have nothing to do with God. It's not to say anything bad about people who believe, but to me it's blind acceptance of something that you have absolutely no proof of."**

And I don't typically have psychic experiences, but all of a sudden, in that state of nothingness, I heard a voice. And the voice said to me in my head, "So you don't believe in God?" And I said, "No." The voice said, "But if you believed in God, would you believe that God has a will for you?" I said, "No." The voice said, "But if you believed in God and believed that God had a will for you, what would that will be?" I said, "I don't know." And the voice said, "God's will for you is the same as God's will for every other human being on this planet. Deal with it." And it was like, OK, that's my job. Life is a roller coaster, and I've got to hang on, deal with the ups and downs, ins and outs, injustices, and everything else that goes along with the trip.

**Tablet:** Aaron, you said in our pre-interview that God "seems to be a manufactured mythology that can go very, very wrong."

**Aaron:** I have a sensitivity to the way God, and the God concept, is abused and made all too facile. I sometimes describe it to people as "The Football God," that at the end of a game, the wide receiver catches the touchdown in the end zone and being interviewed afterward, is asked by the reporter how was he able to catch the ball, and he says, "I just focused, and God was with me."

The obvious implication is that God was *against* the defensive back, who is probably just as good of a person and probably thinks of his prayer life as just as powerful. So it's, in some ways, the abuse of a magnificent, if always mysterious, transcendent idea brought down to the most mundane of things that worries me most about how God is operated in the world, even though I think that if you're going to live a God-centered life, it's actually in the small moments that a notion of a theology can and maybe should be interesting, but not in the way it's trotted out as if it's a divinity on your side and therefore necessarily not on the other person's side.

**Sxdni:** For me, the monotheistic concept, as it's classically understood by so many people around the world, feels very limiting, very human-centric, and doesn't fit with me. The universe and the mystery is too big to be reduced to this monotheistic, singular concept. And even though more of us have learned about—and have awareness of—the idea of multiple genders in our classic texts, the way that the monotheistic God is used against queer folks, trans folks, and various other marginalized populations, really affects me as someone who is part of that grouping.

**Tablet:** I'd like to see a show of hands: Who would say they previously had serious belief in God?

*[Four raise their hands: Francis, Aaron, Leah; Lee is in between.]*

**Francis:** I'm a Jew by choice. I converted to Judaism with a Conservative synagogue here in Massachusetts. I leaned more humanistic even before I got into Judaism, but I was raised in this fundamentalist Christianity, which I could write a book about—it was crazy. But I remember when I was 17 in 1998 I watched a livestream between Peter Atkins and William Lane Craig. Atkins was atheist and Greg was a theist, and I just knew in my heart I agreed with Peter Atkins, even though I couldn't say that out loud, because that would have been horrible, I would have been disowned. I later came out as bisexual, and that was easier than coming out as an agnostic or a humanistic person. Finally I had to follow the courage of my convictions, and I came out as humanistic.

It doesn't matter what you believe, it matters what you do. I read Felix Adler and I arrived at Judaism. You have to follow your heart, you have to follow your reason—above all else. And if you don't have your reason, you're nothing. As Sinatra sings, what is a man? What has he got if not himself? He has nothing, right? That's my situation.

**Tablet:** Aaron, can you explain why at one time you had more belief than you do now?

**Aaron:** I grew up in a family that was comprehensively Jewish, culturally, ritually, culinarily, calendrically. And the notion of the people of Israel and the rituals, holidays, and State of Israel were, and still are, everything to us. At some point, as I continued to grow and get more involved, the God of Israel became more prominent—a commanding God that had requirements and obligations. And at some point, even though God is the connective thread to the Jew and his or her purported obligations, I became nearly as connected to the obligations without the intervening ligament of the God figure. That is, and I say this with a healthy amount of humility: Do I really know that there is or isn't God? No. But it has not really hemorrhaged much of my commitment to the practices, prayers, concepts, and structures of the obligating Jewish God. It's just that some of the intervening material has gotten much more Swiss-cheesy.

**Lee:** When I was very young, I was raised in Israel as *hiloni*—a secular Jew; you don't really have this category in the U.S. Anything that seemed magical or miraculous, I had this idea in my head when I was very young, *that was God*. Organized religion wasn't telling me that; it was just what I understood. But there have been so many terrible things that have happened, where the existence of God for me just seems like a ridiculous concept. The existence of goodness and love in the world—I really resonated with what Marsha was saying about where you get your values from. What does it mean to be a good human in the world? It might come from Jewish culture, in part, but it doesn't come from belief in God.

**Tablet:** What I hear often in the Jewish

world is an idea that God shows up in people's actions—God is in the response to the tragedy, injustice, or adversity. Not that God is operating marionette strings and deciding who lives and who dies, but that God is evident in how people take care of each other, mourn with each other, repair what's broken. Does that resonate at all?

**Irene:** I think that almost diminishes the response, to be honest. I think about the Paul Stookey song, "There is Love": "Whenever two or more of you are gathered in his name, there is love." I think it's diminished by saying *that* is the presence of God or that action is where God comes in. It doesn't work for me. For me, atheism was a factory setting; I came this way. But even if I hadn't been atheist at the start, once I'd learned about the Holocaust, I would have said, "That's it." If someone comes back and says, "No, God isn't actually the puppeteer, but He's among us," well, no, no. This is *us*. We're doing this.

**Tablet:** We see beauty, connection, community and love—even divinity—in other people all the time. But to me, that's not God.

**Marsha:** I think of another example of a "response": There's a tragedy and somebody responds by drinking heavily and driving. Is God in *that* response—in that guy who killed five people? So which responses is God in? I definitely push back on that.

**Jennifer:** It's selective to say God is in the response. Everything is a response to something else. So the person who shoots up the school, that's a response to maybe being bullied. It just feels very selective. I also believe we all have a responsibility, Jewish or not, to be a good person and to choose how we respond to *that*.

**Leah:** I take great issue with the idea that God is in the response. I ask again and again: Why do people have to externalize their goodness? Their response is human goodness; why can't we own it? Why do we have to say that it's an external being that causes this motivation to care for one another? Why can't we say, "We are Jews and we try to fight the evils in our own nature and in humanity by cultivating our communal mutual responsibility"?

**Leah,** you described to me a sense that "a scrim lifted" when you left Hasidic Judaism—and you reckoned then with the reality of human responsibility.

**Leah:** When that scrim was in place, there was a certain passivity every day, because responsibility was externalized on God, obligation was externalized onto God's command. But when I left, it was now on *me* to act, on *me* to have a sense of obligation, on *me* to cultivate the goodness in me, and on me to build community.

**Lee:** We see beauty, connection, community and love—even divinity—in other people all the time. But to me, that's not God. I've read the Tanach many times and I use it in my literary work. That God is interventionist, constantly acting to punish, help, teach us something. If that's God, I'm not a believer.

**Tablet:** I want to talk about prayer—whether you do it, and what that activity means to you.

**Aaron:** I pray every day—formally using the liturgy, and it's in the crevices of my mind. Sometimes I pray successfully, meaning I don't consider prayer to be successful just by getting through the page and articulating syllables. It's successful when I feel like I have, through the liturgy, curated an intentional spiritual elevation, which sometimes does and sometimes does not push up against my ongoing questions about whether or not there is anything behind that curtain. But I can find meaningful, exalted, lofty prayer experiences without even going near the question about whether or not the God or the name of God that I'm articulating in the prayer has to be there in order for the experience to be real, meaningful, beautiful, and pushing me toward the good.

**Nancy:** I participate in our services. I've been reading our new very beautiful prayer book. When I read the God passages, what I'm loving is the community, the music, the Jewish experience, the touch. And usually there's a value somewhere in there—*emet* [truth] or *ahava* [love] or something that doesn't require me to have belief. I'm trying, actually, to get a little more spiritual feeling, but I don't think that means I have to believe in God to get that feeling. In the prayer

setting, I can do that, but it's not really praying. It's useful to be in the space, but God isn't there. I actually meditate in the morning and I feel closer, in some ways, to that spirituality—that I see and recognize in other people. And by the way, I respect a lot of people who really believe in God. If they're good people.

**Sxdni:** I follow along with the sound of prayers. I just kind of ignore the God-language or put my own words in there. Hearing the Hebrew feels very visceral, powerful, it touches something deep within me. Even though I made the choice not to be a B-Mitzvah, not to be involved when I was a child, it's still always a very visceral thing for me to hear that Hebrew and see the Torah, those letters. So I will pray, but I either substitute, take things out, or ignore. I have written some of my own prayers. I have Marcia Falk's *Book of Blessings*, and I use that. But it does feel important to me to experience—Jewishly—the bigger sense that I'm connected to other Jewish folks, and to the ancestors. It just feels very Jewish to me to be involved in Jewish things.

**David:** The congregation with which I'm involved does not pray. And part of that is a question of integrity: *I say the words I believe in.* And if I don't believe in them, I don't say them. One of my Sunday school students—the daughter of atheist, secular, humanistic parents—at one point told the story of finding her sister at her bed doing this [he demonstrates hands together in prayer] at night. She asked her sister, "What are you doing?" And the sister said, "I'm doing my begging." After that conversation, within our small little Sunday school class, we referred to prayer as "beg, beg, flatter, flatter, beg, beg, flatter, flatter." This was a group of kids I took to 10 different houses of worship, only two of which were Jewish, and they started to say, "You know, a lot of these prayers are beg, beg, flatter, flatter."

**Jennifer:** That really rings true and is something I hadn't thought about. I will say the counter, which is that when I was in Israel for a Birthright trip, some of the Israelis who were also atheists, said, "You really have it easy over there in America because a lot of you Reform

Jews don't speak Hebrew, so when you say these prayers, you have no idea what you're saying." I think about that a lot. I don't pray. However, every once in a while, we'll light the candles on Shabbat and we say those prayers. I sing the Shema with my daughter every night. It connects me to the Jewish tradition. But even though I know what the translation is, because it's in Hebrew, I'm able to kind of mentally separate it from God, saying something *to* God. It's just this little song that my ancestors thousands of years ago were also singing. So I actually really appreciate what David said, although I will continue to do what we do because the language is connecting me to my roots and to Judaism.

**Tablet:** The last two Pew studies on Jewish identity have found a sizable number of identified Jews say they have no religion or they are Jews of no religion. Do you think that your cohort of Jewish atheists (or nonbelievers) is larger than the Jewish community acknowledges or talks about? Raise your hand if you think that's the case?

*[All hands go up.]*

**Tablet:** Raise your hand if you feel the mainstream Jewish community does not make Jewish spaces feel welcome for nonbelievers.

*[Four agree: Karen, Marsha, Judy, Lee. Sxdni and Nancy signal they're unsure.]*

**Tablet:** I want to end by asking: What do you wish the wider Jewish community understood about what it means to be an invested, connected, involved Jew, and also a nonbeliever?

**Marsha:** I wish that more people realized that our values, our beliefs in family and tradition, in every aspect of Jewish life, remains the same [as believers]. Because to us, those things go to the core of what it means to be Jewish. It has nothing to do with the belief in God. I wish more people realized that we're exactly the same as they are.

**Judy:** Too many don't think that it's even possible to be both Jewish and atheist.

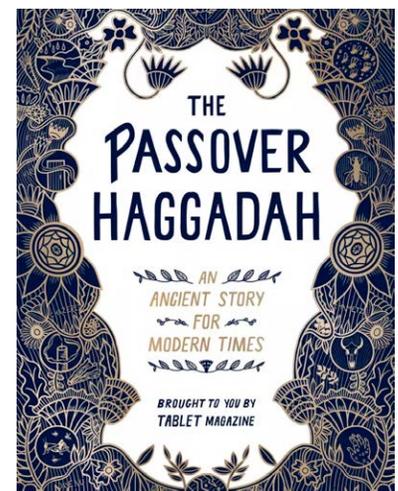
**Aaron:** First, I wish more people understood that [nonbelief], and certainly profound doubt, is actually a rather authentic Jewish position. And that the more you study the writings of the sages, the more we understand that they

*question*—much more than what modern calcifications of their beliefs seem to suggest. And number two, that there is as wide a chasm among believers in terms of the differences that they ascribe to the different beliefs of God as there is a chasm between any of those believers and one who has almost no belief. And therefore, to be in the realm of belief does not mean that there's anything homogeneous about that. There's a heterogeneity of belief, including those who have varying understandings of the God concept and those who are teetering on the edge of having none.

**Leah:** Being an atheist has been ubiquitous among Jews since the beginning of time ... I'm fascinated by the fact that our people have basically taken what I consider to be a large basket into which we threw every force on our

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lives—over which we have no control—collected them, and called them God. I think that the act of daily acknowledging, “There are things over which I have no control, and let me come together as a people and find a way to move forward,” is probably one of the keys to our continued existence. Atheist Jews are not a modern phenomenon. I don’t think we’re that small. I think we’ve been a people more focused on praxis than on belief.

**Irene:** I just wish the larger Jewish community could understand that there’s no one way to do Jewish or *be* Jewish. If you identify as Jewish and call yourself Jewish, *dayenu*. That should be enough. I’d like to be included in the Jewish community, and I don’t think the fact that I am an atheist should have any effect on it at all. I would hope that Jews of faith feel the same way about *our* communities.

**Francis:** First, Judaism is a culture, not just a religion. Second, even as a religion, it’s an ancestral religion—we honor the ancestors in our practice; it’s not a soteriological religion [the theology that studies salvation]. As Leah said, it’s much more about practice than about belief. And finally, to echo something Aaron said: The ancestors, including minorities, were much more skeptical. The ancestors were a lot more freethinking than people in modernity give them credit for.

**Sxdni:** Jews are not one way. There are Jewish people who don’t fit the mold, including Jewish pagans, atheists, and a whole range of folks who have been left out or cast aside or kicked out or just felt that they would not fit in.

**Karen:** There are ways of connecting that the larger community doesn’t always understand or appreciate. While I was listening to people talk about prayer, I identified a lot. I don’t pray because I don’t believe. And yet I know my go-to place is *niggunim* [songs without words]. Because I don’t have cognitive dissonance, and I don’t have to worry about what the words are saying or mean. Somewhere in my Jewishness, it speaks to me.

**Jennifer:** The ethics are enough to guide you. I think that *tikkun olam*, *tzedakah*, *teshuva*, all of that is enough to

“There are Jewish people who don’t fit the mold, including Jewish pagans, atheists, and a whole range of folks who have been left out or cast aside.”

guide you in this world and give you direction if you’re seeking it, purpose if you’re seeking it. I married a lapsed Catholic, and though I’ve never actually personally experienced anyone trying to gatekeep Judaism from me, I know in the broader world or on the internet, I hear otherwise. That gatekeeping exists, but you can be in an interfaith marriage or you can be an atheist and be a very active part of the Jewish world. You can contribute incredible things to the Jewish world. You can raise Jewish children. You are not depriving the Jewish world of future Jewish babies. I think a lot of people have this idea that we’re losing our numbers and the Jewish world is disappearing. It’s not. It’s changing. And that’s what it should be doing. But it’s not disappearing. I think all of us are proof of that. We don’t believe in the religion part of our ethno-religion, but we believe in lots of other factors of it. More religious people—or people who are a little more gatekeepy—need to understand that. If you gatekeep, that’s exactly how you keep people out. You’ll get fewer people involved if you actually close the door on them.

**David:** I grew up in a humanistic Jewish congregation that was well known in the area and found I was challenged by the other Jewish students at my school: “How can you be Jewish and not believe

in God?” There is great goodness, wisdom, comfort, inspiration from Judaism, with or without a focus on the supernatural. There is powerful value in studying and practicing Judaism, being connected to the Jewish community. Sxdni talked about diversity. There is a diversity in the Jewish community, whether you acknowledge it or not. There *has* been for a very long period of time. Given the state the world is in right now, do we really want to make Judaism unpalatable to people who identify as Jewish? Israel was founded by secular Jews.

**Nancy:** I love Abraham Joshua Heschel’s comment about marching in Selma—that it was his feet that were doing the praying. That is a signifier of all the goodness of our heritage, the traditions, and most importantly, the wisdom, which goes back to what we started with: behavior. There are so many ways to be Jewish. Maybe I can’t even aspire to all the ways that exist, but I don’t have to.

**Lee:** We’re still all connected by history, by choice, by values. The stories that we tell to make sense of the world—we’re influenced by those stories even if we don’t attribute them to divinity. If we stay really true to the values that are at the heart of Judaism, then there’s no reason why we don’t belong, too. But to make it this artificial distinction as though there’s something in the liturgy that says people who don’t believe in God need to be cast out—I don’t know of anything like that. There are many examples of welcoming people who don’t have exactly the same way of looking at things. So why shouldn’t that be true now, too? If they’re so worried about the continuation of Judaism, maybe all of us should be in the room. ■

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# Wanted: More Rabbis

Non-Orthodox seminaries try to adapt to changing communal needs—and shrinking enrollment

BY PAULA JACOBS

**W**hen Rabbi Irwin Kula attended the Jewish Theological Seminary Rabbinical School 40-plus years ago, his studies emphasized a text-based, academic approach. And when he was ordained in 1982, most of his class of approximately 40 rabbinical graduates—all white and male—took pulpit jobs.

In spring 2023, JTS plans to ordain 12 rabbis and three cantors—a diverse group of graduates in terms of gender, age, and sexual orientation, as well as Jewish and professional journeys, but far smaller than Kula's class. The current first-year class at the Conservative seminary is even smaller, consisting of seven rabbinical and five cantorial students.

Nor is JTS alone. Non-Orthodox rabbinical schools across America are experiencing a significant decline in enrollment, affecting both these institutions and the American Jewish community at large as the demand for rabbis exceeds supply, particularly as baby boomers retire and others leave because of burn-out. "It's a period of unprecedented disruption and change," explained Kula, president emeritus of Clal, the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. "People are innovating—there are more people serving as spiritual guides and coaches than ever before—and fewer are studying in seminaries than ever before."

Indeed, across America, the religious landscape is changing. "People are engaging with religion in a much broader way than they used to, congregational attendance has declined, and affiliation is decreasing," said Wendy Cadge, founder of the Chaplain Innovation Lab,

Barbara Mandel Professor of Humanistic Social Sciences and professor of sociology at Brandeis University, and co-author with Shelly Rambo of the book *Chaplaincy and Spiritual Care in the Twenty-First Century*. "Rather than going to congregations, people are engaging in online groups, listening to podcasts, and spiritual entrepreneurs are making their resources available in different ways."

But rabbis are still in demand—a demand that outstrips supply, even as congregations shrink. This year, like last year, the Conservative movement—50% of whose rabbis in North America serve congregations—anticipates a shortage of rabbis to fill available positions, Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal, CEO of the Rabbinical Assembly and United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, told *Tablet*: "There is greater demand, along with smaller numbers of rabbis being ordained. Also, congregations want more rabbis to do education and engagement work. So congregations that used to think about one rabbi for 500 households now understand that in a time when it's about relationships, they need more rabbis to serve their communities."

In this environment where denominations matter less than they once did, non-Orthodox rabbinical schools must prepare for the future and clearly differentiate themselves as they compete for a shrinking applicant pool—whether it's a focus on academic approach, spirituality, internships, or residency requirements. Rabbinical schools are also tackling the current rabbi shortage with rabbinical mentoring and synagogue internships. And, using strategies like curriculum changes, tuition reduction, online options, and para-rabbinic training, they are trying to reverse the

current trend and attract candidates to serve the Jewish community as spiritual leaders, chaplains, social justice activists, educators, campus rabbis, and organizational professionals.

When Rabbi Ayelet Cohen, dean of the JTS Rabbinical School, was ordained in 2002, her graduating class consisted of 25 students, including a few women. (The Rabbinical School did not admit openly gay students until 2007.) "The student population now much more reflects the diversity of the Jewish community. So communities can see themselves in their rabbinic leadership, which is very empowering because there is a space for them in their community," she said.

Since assuming her position last summer, Cohen has conducted an extensive curriculum review, meeting with faculty, students, and other stakeholders to ensure that the curriculum reflects JTS and its expertise in classical Jewish text and learning, while also responding to contemporary needs. That includes integrating the in-house pastoral program with rabbinical studies and deepening the spiritual lives of students. Guest rabbis speak to students about their own spiritual lives and prayer practices so students can begin to experiment with different prayer modalities and mindfulness practices to deepen their skills as prayer leaders. Students also learn about the diversity and complexity of life in Israel during their year of study at the Schechter Institute and Conservative Yeshiva.

"We are living in a time where no one can anticipate being in one job for the entire arc of their professional life. We want our students to be prepared for different kinds of rabbinic work," explained Cohen.

Eight of the 15 JTS rabbis ordained

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last year serve congregations, and most of this year's graduates are seeking pulpit jobs. JTS rabbinical students also intern in a wide variety of settings, tapping into a broad network of rabbinic mentors. For example, fourth-year student Ilana Sandberg, who aspires to work with young adults, has interned at Brandeis University Hillel, Nativ (the Conservative movement's gap year in Israel program), List College (the JTS undergraduate school), and the Orange-town Jewish Center.

There's a sea change today in contemporary life including issues of gender, personal choice, hyperpartisanship, and reexamination of Judaism today, says Rabbi Brad Artson, dean of the Conservative Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, which will ordain nine students this year (six students are in the 2022-23 entering class). "Rabbinical schools are the canary in the coal mine," he said. "Having a rabbinical curriculum of 25 years ago no longer fits the real choices people are facing today."

Last year, Artson decided to address the situation upfront, assembling a 16-member "blue ribbon" commission of American Jewish University leadership, staff, and alumni, as well as Rabbinical Assembly members. Based on their recommendations, he created a proposal that became a recalibrated rabbinical school program beginning in fall 2023. It will reflect Ziegler's original goal of integrating spirit, mind, and heart with several key changes: Students will attend Ziegler for four rather than five years; the fourth year will be a paid residency, with practical work experience in various settings; annual tuition will be reduced from \$30,000 to \$7,000; and a 10- to 12-week intensive Israel experience will replace the full-year Israel program, given the extensive Israel experience of most entering rabbinical students.

"I had many sleepless nights thinking there was no way forward, but once we started the blue ribbon process, I am sleeping through the night," said Artson, who has now received more serious inquiries from prospective students than since 1999. "We need to be open but also be true to our core, committed to text study, Halacha, and the wisdom of Jewish heritage. I am really excited about

**"Even with financial aid, many prospective students—often saddled with undergraduate debt—cannot afford a five-year, full-time program."**

what the future is bringing because it is already coming."

When Miriam Hoffman was applying to rabbinical school, she found Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion the right fit after visiting elsewhere. "HUC was so warm and exciting," she said of the Reform seminary. "Strategically, I wanted a program to learn how to do practical rabbi things." After ordination this spring, she will serve at Brandeis University Hillel, leveraging her USC Hillel internship experience and HUC pastoral care classes. "It's been incredible how I have learned to help people and there has been a lot of invaluable learning, including how HUC builds community."

"The rabbinate is changing in response to the changing needs of the American Jewish community ... We are going through a moment of transformation," said HUC-JIR President Andrew Rehfeld. "The future for us is to recognize that institutions and denominations change." For instance, in 2023, HUC will ordain 30 rabbis on all three U.S. campuses (New York, Los Angeles, and Cincinnati), compared to 29 last year; in 2022-23, 14 students began rabbinical studies.

In spring 2022, HUC announced controversial plans to close its Cincinnati

campus, a move that may further reduce the number of rabbinical students. The last incoming class in Cincinnati is the current second-year rabbinical class, which will be ordained in 2026, after which the residential rabbinical program will operate only in New York and Los Angeles.

In academic year 2024, Hebrew Union College will launch a "flexible residency pathway" targeted at prospective rabbinical and cantorial students (such as second-career professionals) who cannot relocate to HUC campuses in New York and Los Angeles. It will provide opportunities for online coursework, training in Union for Reform Judaism congregations in a range of communities, and periods of in-person cohort learning.

HUC also offers rabbinical students opportunities to learn new skills with supplementary courses and workshops, including teaching and leading worship online. This past January, 10 rabbinical students participated in a four-day program through One America, gaining the skills to navigate in a polarized society. Rabbinical students can also concurrently enroll in an M.A. or certificate program at HUC's Zelikow School of Jewish Nonprofit Management to hone their entrepreneurial and management skills.

Despite these initiatives, legacy seminaries still face an uphill battle: Even with financial aid, many prospective students—often saddled with undergraduate debt—cannot afford a five-year, full-time program, with tuition and living expenses topping \$60,000 annually in New York and LA.

Historically, JTS and HUC have offered strong academic programs combined with professional training, but the traditional rigid five-year curriculum may no longer fit. "There are now many more options for people to learn rabbinic skills and study Judaism in a serious way," said Leonard Saxe, Klutznick Professor of Contemporary Jewish Studies at Brandeis University. "People want flexibility and control of their lives."

As rabbinical schools look toward the future, they are innovating to address communal needs. For example, in fall

## Ukraine Relief

### Donation made to Chabad of Odessa

Thanks in large part to the immense generosity of donations from Tablet readers who contributed to the Ukraine relief fundraiser featuring Bernard-Henri Lévy and Natan Sharansky in February, Tablet made a \$10,000 donation last week to the Chabad of Odessa, which has been evacuating and caring for orphans, among other things. A heartfelt thanks to all who contributed.

2023, the nondenominational Hebrew Seminary: A Rabbinical School for Deaf & Hearing will launch a two-year online para-rabbinic program that incorporates Torah study with ritual and pastoral training. “It will complement the rabbinic profession as it exists today,” said President and Rosh Yeshiva Rabbi Jonah Rank. “There are many Jews who want to serve as community leaders but can’t commit to five years in rabbinical school. There are also small communities within and outside the U.S. that can’t afford a rabbi but may wish to invest in a passionate lay leader who can serve as their spiritual leader after completing this program.”

While Jewish text study remains at the core of rabbinical education, spiritual formation, relationship-building, and “meaning-making” are also fundamental. “What difference does this wisdom, text, or practice make,” said Kula, “and what does the study of the text mean for the lives of real people? That needs to be the most important question today.”

Spiritual formation is a critical element in rabbinic education at Hebrew College, for which it recently received a three-year, \$150,000 Covenant Foundation Signature Grant. “The basis of rabbinic leadership, as we see it at Hebrew College, is to be a spiritually alive Jew. Torah and need to be the language of your soul and animate your inner life. The reason that it is important is that if one is going to try to help other people

find meaningful engagement with Jewish life, it has to be meaningful for you,” explained Rabbi Daniel Klein, dean of students at the pluralistic rabbinical school, which will ordain 14 rabbis this spring—and which recently announced that it would admit students in interfaith relationships, a move that the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College announced in 2015.

The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College’s “spiritual direction” program offers rabbinical students an opportunity to identify and appreciate the sacred in their lives, says Rabbi Melissa Heller, director of admissions and recruitment at RRC, which emphasizes deep learning, inclusivity, social and racial justice, and multifaith engagement. RRC will ordain six rabbis in 2023.

The Academy for Jewish Religion in New York has always flexibly accommodated second-career students like Nicole Goluboff, who began rabbinical school after 20 years practicing law. Its curriculum includes courses like science and Judaism, entrepreneurship and community, and difficult conversations. “Our curriculum is how we address the constantly evolving needs of the Jewish community,” said Ora Horn Prouser, CEO and academic dean of the pluralistic online institution.

The transdenominational Academy for Jewish Religion California also teaches full- and part-time students online. “The transdenominational Jewish element speaks to people’s hearts and exposes them to many lenses of Jewish life and practice,” said Rabbi Rochelle Robins, vice president and academic dean. (The school is not affiliated with AJR in New York.)

Meanwhile, ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal, founded by the late Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, offers four online ordination paths. Its approach to renewing Judaism derives from understanding paradigm shifts in the Jewish world, explains Rabbi Aubrey Glazer, professor of philosophy and Jewish thought and director of studies for the rabbinic program.

Rabbis ordained by these nondenominational seminaries serve congregations across the U.S. including Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist

Judaism pulpits. That includes the majority of alumni of the Academy for Jewish Religion in New York; 40% of rabbinical alumni of Hebrew College, whose first class graduated in 2008; and, since 2003, approximately 80% of graduates of the Academy for Jewish Religion California.

In Judaism we need to be able to pivot and change, emphasizes Rabbi Shmuel Polin. As an HUC rabbinical student, he learned this lesson in an elective class—leading through innovation—taught by Glean Network.” During COVID lockdown, it inspired him to innovate and create the Opening the Ark Project—the reconstruction of a Polish-Lithuanian wooden ark destroyed during the Holocaust.

Today people seek meaning in their lives. “We live in a post-truth moment, in which the color of the sky is up for debate, let alone the meanings of life. Folks today are seeking—more than ever in my lifetime, at least—a handrail to grab onto as the world spins off its axis. And increasingly, they’re seeking out wisdom, traditions, and spiritual communities to serve that purpose,” explained Rabbi Elan Babchuck, executive vice president of Clal and founding director of Glean Network.

Rabbinical schools play an important role in training their students to address this need. Babchuck sums it up: “Rabbis today are faced with increasingly decentralized modes of Jewish practice and profoundly destabilized institutions from which they are expected to serve. This is neither the first nor the last time in Jewish history that these two trends have coincided, and each of the generations past that have navigated similar circumstances has found ways to breathe new life into our rituals, our liturgy, our practices, and our holidays.” ■

*This article was originally published on March 13, 2023.*

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# Regina Spektor's Howl

At a recent concert in Los Angeles, Spektor's Soviet Jewishness took center stage

BY JAKE MARMER

This is a nice way to be ... surrounded," quipped Regina Spektor as she walked out on stage of the Walt Disney auditorium in Los Angeles last week. The auditorium's stage is ensconced inside a large oval, with seating on all sides, and Spektor's trademark bit of dark humor—a mixture of claustrophobia and warmth turned into a joke—was the perfect opening for this concert, which, as it unraveled, felt increasingly cathartic and ritualistic.

The concert took place on the evening after Purim, with the holiday's afterglow and daze still in the air, and it was the holiday's carnivalesque fusion of trauma and merriment that provided Spektor with an opportunity to communicate, with deep artistry and clarity, the quintessence of the Russian-speaking Jewish experience—her own heritage, which is also the heritage of some 500,000 others living in the U.S. today—myself included.

"If you think about it, Purim is a lot like Halloween," she said at some point midconcert, and after a beat added: "That is, if Halloween involved the attempted genocide of Jewish people." And again, there was that dark humor, the kind that both makes you laugh and sends shivers down your spine.

Spektor went on to recount a morning from long ago, when she was living in her "rent-controlled New York apartment," and was listening to an NPR program, in which she first learned the concept of Holocaust denial. She recounted being shocked: "I knew so many survivors growing up," she said, with wistfulness, and went on to perform her song "Ink Stains." This song was never formally released on any album, and

she does not perform it often. Its refrain is plaintive: "I wish they'd cure the friendly neighbors / Of the disease which makes them haters," but on the whole, it is a harsh and angry song with a narrative that reveals her wish for the Holocaust deniers in clear terms: "All the Holocaust deniers / To a bathhouse warm and quiet / Complimentary soap, complimentary haircut / And gas 'em up until they know that / All the ink stains on their wrists mean business / And God is the almighty witness." The anger she unleashes is undisguised, as ugly as it is relatable. The song culminates in a final stretch of wordless, singing-shouting across the melody, with emotion laid bare in all of its unspeakable pain.

It makes sense that "Ink Stains" was never formally recorded. It is the kind of song one would not want to commit to the stasis of a record: In order to be understood, it is meant to be experienced wholly, live, in the moment, and with others. Such is its power. What made this performance unique was that the wordless segment contained a direct reference to the "Jewish" musical scale—the melodic riff in a minor key that is found in cantorial music. It was as if Spektor felt compelled to draw an explicit connection between Jewish liturgy and her own art.

When the song was over, Spektor herself seemed shaken: "I would like to sing a few more songs, but I don't know how to just do it after a song like that." After a moment's contemplation she pointed out that it was a full moon night. "So how about we just howl?" she offered. This was not a joke: She started counting off, then interrupted herself: "Seems wrong to count off the howl." Just then, someone in the audience went for it, and then others joined, and more

yet, and before long, the whole of Walt Disney Hall was merged into a single, polyvocal, incredibly loud howl. It felt both ridiculous and profound, whimsical and utterly necessary, primal and of the moment. And, reader, I, too howled: at the moon, at her song, at the holiday, at the fancy Disney Hall, at the ancestral trauma, at the still lingering pandemic, and the unending war.

Russia's brutal invasion into Ukraine received a grim acknowledgment from Spektor, along with the invitation to donate to a cause that supports Ukrainian refugees. I've heard endless variations on this invitation over the past year, but what made Spektor's appeal different was the tone of lucid, personal urgency. This war has been the center in the life of many, many Russian-speaking Jews, no matter how long ago they've left the old country, and whether they were born in Russia, like Spektor, or in Ukraine, as I was. Immigrants tend to either assimilate or resist assimilation by reembracing the culture of their origin. I know I belong to the former group, but in the weeks and months of the war, I've felt increasingly isolated from my American peers and friends. There is a sense that those around me cannot

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understand what I am going through, every day, worrying about my family, mourning the destruction of the world where I grew up. In such moments, years of assimilation seem to fall apart.

The song Spektor chose to sing after this invocation, “Apres Moi,” was not randomly chosen. While normally, the French phrase *apres moi l’deluge*, implies a cavalier, careless attitude toward the future, in the context of Spektor’s refrain the line takes on a sense of existential threat: the sense that deluge—of troubles and threats—is literally after you. When she chants “I (uh) must go on standing / I’m not my own, it’s not my choice,” it seems to be, on the one hand, a universal gesture of resilience. On the other, though, there is something very specific to the Soviet and post-Soviet kind of Jewishness here. Spektor turns the volume up on Russian-sounding intonations within the song that resolve in the verse, borrowed from a poem by Boris Pasternak, which Spektor sings in Russian. In this performance, in the context of invocation of the war in Ukraine, Pasternak’s verse became the emotional center of this song, and perhaps, of the whole concert.

Pasternak’s original poem relies heavily on word music, and it is this music that permeates his lines, creating a more visceral meaning than the actual semantic signification of the words ever could. It is February, and the poet is moved to grab the ink and cry, via the poem, mourning February itself for a reason that is never explicitly stated. There is a dread of something coming to an end, some

“One cannot overstate the gravitas of Boris Pasternak in the minds and souls of many generations of people from the vast Soviet expanse.”

“thundering muddle” that ominously “burns with a dark spring.” The word Pasternak uses to describe the crying, *navzryd*, is the sort of uncontrollable, loud, all-consuming bawling punctuated with a deep sob and violence and gasping for air. It is the sort of a word the mere invocation of which brings tears to your eyes because it can remind you of the times you have experienced that sort of crying.

But what does Pasternak’s weeping February have to do with the rest of Spektor’s lyrics—or with this war at hand? One cannot overstate the gravitas of Boris Pasternak in the minds and souls of many generations of people from the vast Soviet expanse. His words were treated with the reverence pious people reserve for their sacred texts. I still feel sacrilegious for even wanting to translate him. At the same time, there was also the unspoken matter of Pasternak’s Jewishness, of which he was deeply self-conscious, having ultimately chosen to convert because that was the only way to be accepted, to be seen as a poet with a right to express himself in Russian. Knowing that, Spektor’s lines, “I’m not my own, it’s not my choice” begin to cohere.

In Walt Disney Hall, this song and Pasternak’s lines within it, felt prophetic, and she sang them as if channeling a message she received rather than composed. Such is the power of great poetry:

For whatever Pasternak may have had in mind describing the February he beheld, for so many of us, *this* February was the time when we marked the first anniversary of the war. February came and went, and the war continues, and it is impossible to not see this spring as tainted, or cursed with the war’s weight.

Between Spektor’s post-Purim howl and Pasternak’s bawling, the moment’s heaviness was front and center in this concert. And so was Spektor’s attempt to summon this heaviness, to extract it and in that way, to gain some sort of a release. In that way, Spektor’s performance was a reminder of the shared identity as a source of strength, and felt life-giving.

The concert, organized in support of Spektor’s new album, *Home, Before and After*, featured many new songs, as well as a selection of her hits, and many moments of interaction with the audience. At one point, someone shouted out: “I love your shoes,” to which she immediately responded: “I was kind of expecting this from LA.” Turning around toward the section of the audience that were facing her back, she said: “I always play with my eyes closed, so you’re not missing anything. This is what it looks like,” she said, closing her eyes and stretching her hands over imaginary piano, wobbling from side to side. It was a kind of an effortless vaudevillesque moment, and it occurred to me that the whole Russian-speaking Jewish experience revolves around three poles: our poetry, the war, and the jokes. Everything else, from eros to ethics, revolves around these and is suffused by them.

The concert hall was completely full—I did not see a single empty seat. Who were all these people who seemed as deeply moved by her music as I was? It was a multigenerational, hip, nerdy, colorful crowd that howled and clapped and begged for an encore. “She’s the leader of my people,” Fran Drescher once quipped about Barbra Streisand. I feel that way about Regina Spektor, even if I am quite uncertain as to who these people of ours are. ■

*This article was originally published on March 15, 2023.*

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# Men in Formation

Franciscan friars tackle substance abuse and purposelessness, across the river from West Point

BY MAGGIE PHILLIPS

American men had been struggling for some time when, three years ago this month, the COVID-19 pandemic began in earnest in the U.S. In the years immediately following, nationwide “deaths of despair”—defined as deaths from drug overdoses, suicide, or alcohol—increased, particularly among men. Researchers have been shedding more and more light on a problem that has only worsened in the shadows, where it has been largely overlooked by policymakers, and reaching many of the same conclusions about the contributing factors.

In the aggregate, men’s problems are myriad. One frequently cited statistic states that men are four times more likely to die by suicide than women. According to data from the CDC, drug overdose deaths increased around 30% between 2019 and 2020, to a total of 91,799; the National Institutes of Health data showed that more than 70% of the drug opioid overdose deaths in 2021 were among men. At the beginning of 2022, over 11% of men between the ages of 25 and 54 were neither working nor looking for work, a number that has been increasing since the latter half of the 20th century.

Together, two largely male communities in New York’s Hudson Valley have centuries of experience helping men face challenges. In Garrison, New York, atop what they call “the Holy Mountain,” the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement run St. Christopher’s Inn, a men’s addiction treatment facility dedicated to helping residents find their purpose. In 2021, an annus horribilis for drug opioid overdose deaths in the U.S., St. Christopher’s boasted a day treatment program

completion rate of nearly 60% for the previous three years. (For comparison, SAMHSA annual data available for 2019 and 2020 shows completion rates of 32% and 34%, respectively, for all substance abuse outpatient programs, including day treatment, in New York state.) Just across the river is the United States Military Academy at West Point, with a corps of cadets sworn to uphold duty, honor, and country.

If the diagnoses are correct, and epochal social and economic change are what ails the 21st-century man, St. Christopher’s and West Point—bolstered by purpose, routine, and accountability—may suggest an antidote.

Originally, St. Christopher’s Inn was a chicken coop.

In 1898, a group of Episcopalian religious sisters and friars arrived on the hill that would become known as Graymoor, to care for an abandoned chapel. Seventeen of the sisters and friars from this group, the Society of the Atonement, joined the Catholic Church in 1909. In 1910, they converted their chicken coop into a place for homeless men to stay, a developing ministry for the friars, whose community was located along the Appalachian Trail. Homeless men traveling along what is today Route 9 would frequently come to Graymoor looking for something to eat and a place to stay.

On their website, the Friars’ vision statement insists the “Atonement” in their community’s name should be read as “At-one-ment,” a unity they aim to bring “to a fragmented world through gospel love, mercy and healing.” Friars differ from monks, who are cloistered away from society. (Christian monasticism exists in both Orthodox

Christianity and Catholicism, beginning in North Africa and the Middle East, and dating back to Christianity’s early centuries. Friars, whose name is an Anglicization of *frère*, the French word for brother, arrived in Europe later, around the 12th century; they are predominantly Catholic, although Lutheran and Anglican denominations also have Franciscan religious orders.) Under the leadership of their founder, Father Paul Wattson, the Friars of the Atonement organized their own community under a “rule of life” written by 13th-century ascetic Francisco Bernardone (better known as Saint Francis)—the subject of Franco Zeffirelli’s *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, and a popular fixture in garden statuary.

In the context of religious life, a rule of life refers to a formalized program of living. Australian Catholic monk Michael Casey writes in his book *Strangers to the City* that religious life such as that lived by friars, monks, and nuns “asks us to take on a new identity and to be reshaped according to a different culture,” and the rule of a religious order is designed to help its members through “a progressive and substantial change in attitude” so as to “facilitate a distinctive lifestyle, based on distinctive premises and priorities.” The Friars’ rule is fleshed out in a simple 14-page document, and is centered around vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity; their work is focused on “cultivating a spirit of prayer, of poverty, and of humility.”

On the U.S. home page for the Franciscans, the religious order founded by Francis, the FAQ explains: “All Franciscan friars are first and foremost brothers to each other. All Franciscan friars live the same rule of life and wear the same religious habit.”

At St. Christopher’s Inn, the residents are asked to live, according to their website, “like the Friars did for so many years” (three Friars now live among the men in recovery, in their own wing). There are some differences: The residents wear their own clothes, instead of a religious habit, and they aren’t required to attend Mass, although they are required to join in a daily end-of-day meditation modeled on the 11th step of Alcoholics Anonymous.

But like the Franciscans themselves, the residents are first and foremost brothers to each other. In fact, from the earliest days of the inn to today, the Friars referred to residents as “Brothers Christopher.” The name Christopher means “Christ-bearer,” and calling the men this serves as a reminder of Christ’s message to his followers in the book of Matthew Chapter 25, that in ministering to the hungry and thirsty, the sick, the marginalized, the naked, and the prisoner, they are ministering to him.

Resident life is patterned on the life of the Friars: The men live in dormitory-style accommodations, and they “are asked to perform an assigned activity, to help with upkeep and maintenance,” such as preparing and serving meals for each other, working in admissions to welcome newcomers, or assisting on the grounds. St. Christopher’s Inn has gone through a few iterations since 1910 (at one point, an army barracks was used). A New York Office of Addiction Services and Supports-licensed facility, which provides 24/7 residential treatment, and the site of a Medicare/Medicaid-eligible medical clinic, it little resembles its humble beginnings.

The friars realized many of the homeless men coming to them had deeper issues, often with alcohol. They began hosting regular Alcoholics Anonymous meetings in 1960 (among the first places in the country to do so, according to the Graymoor website). St. Christopher’s became an alcohol rehabilitation site in 1967, and expanded to drug addiction treatment in the 1970s, as more of the men coming to them struggled with substance abuse.

According to Outreach and Intake Manager Joanna Ross, who works in the Admissions Office, men come to St. Christopher’s to be treated for dependencies on alcohol, crack cocaine, meth, and other drugs, but the big change in recent years is the rise of opioids. “It wasn’t like it is now,” she said, describing the clientele shift to opioids since she began working there in 2005. “And then heroin. Because what happens is, they can’t afford pills anymore, and then they go to heroin. It’s cheaper. And now the heroin is laced with fentanyl.”

Almost a year ago, St. Christopher’s

expanded from a 90-day to a yearlong residential program, a transition that is still underway. Prior to COVID, St. Christopher’s was always at capacity, treating typically about 185 men, she said, and descending to a population hovering around the 30s after the pandemic hit. Although Ross said their numbers are “slowly creeping back up,” the change in status to a yearlong program means their dormitory-style living facilities’ capacity is now reduced to 142.

Director of Nursing and Admission Services William Weeks, a family nurse practitioner and himself a former Friar, said the number of men coming to St. Christopher’s Inn who are “much more seriously not well” with depression, anxiety, and PTSD has increased in the past decade. “I think the whole COVID situation kind of exacerbated people’s issues,” said James G. Schiller, executive director at St. Christopher’s, and also a former Friar (old habits die hard—when we first entered Weeks’ office, Schiller greeted him as “Brother Bill”).

Ross said she has seen an increase in men with mental health issues since 2005. “But maybe more so after COVID,” she said, “because people got more depressed, they were home, so that’s really what we struggle with, because we do have pretty strict criteria for mental health.”

Although men can be admitted with anxiety, bipolar disorder, and depression, recent suicide attempts, schizophrenia, and psychosis are all disqualifying. Anyone requiring medically managed detox in an inpatient hospital setting must have completed it prior to coming to St. Christopher’s. The men must also be medically and psychiatrically stable, with any urgent issues addressed before they begin recovery treatment. They must also be 18 or older, and although they span all ages, Ross said there are a lot of residents in their 20s.

St. Christopher’s residents can self-admit, but the admissions office also fields requests from families, inpatient and outpatient rehabilitation facilities, and detox clinics. “We’ve been around for over 100 years,” Ross said. “In the recovery community, most people know

about us.” To get to Graymoor, she said, family members drive the men, they take the train from the city (St. Christopher’s picks them up at the Metro North station in Garrison, as well as any men living within about a half-hour of the inn), or they arrive via Medicaid cabs from other rehab facilities.

Ross said along with Medicaid and Medicare, St. Christopher’s accepts other private insurance, although she notes that the men are less likely to have this since few of them are working. Those with out-of-network insurance are sometimes able to work out a plan with their carrier and St. Christopher’s, and, their website says, “a limited number of scholarships are available for clients who have demonstrated a commitment to the work of recovery but have run out of resources to continue their treatment.”

A cross-partisan consensus is emerging that echoes Weeks’ and Schiller’s observations of the men at St. Christopher’s.

Men face a risk about three times higher than women for dying a death of despair. That’s according to Richard Reeves, Brookings Institute economic studies chair, who last year published *Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do About It*.

The same year Reeves published *Of Boys and Men*, American Enterprise Institute political economist Nicholas Eberstadt wrote a post-pandemic edition of his 2016 study *Men Without Work*, about the declining work rate among American men. In it, he refers to “the New Misery,” a cluster of pathologies among men of prime working age (which he defines as between 25 and 54 years old), who are not in the labor force, and are neither working nor looking for work.

In the updated 2022 edition of *Men Without Work*, Eberstadt contends that the COVID-19 pandemic did not create but exacerbated the New Misery. He writes that the decline of working prime-age men began in the post-WWII era. Their number has gone down by 18 percentage points since 1950, he says, driven almost entirely by men ceasing to look for jobs. And although COVID-19

was a worldwide phenomenon, he writes, “no Western European country reported as low a prime-age male labor force participation rate as America” (Eberstadt makes an exception for Italy, which he says presents issues with data collection).

In both books, Eberstadt and Reeves share a mystification at what they see as a lack of interest among policymakers in the puzzling state of the American male. Eberstadt speaks of “a largely invisible crisis,” attributable in part to an outdated focus on unemployment, rather than joblessness, which ignores those who are neither working nor looking for work. Eberstadt writes that a widened aperture would reveal a rate of prime-age males who are neither working nor looking for work of around 11% (about 7 million men). This rate, he says, is on par with “the tail end of the Great Depression.”

“Men have lost ground,” Reeves writes of the American male, even as women have “shot past” them at school, and increasingly, at work. He cites some data: Boys are less likely than girls to graduate high school on time. Three out of 10 women now out-earn their husbands (twice as many as in the early 1980s), which isn’t a bad thing in and of itself, except that in the U.S., he says, “boys raised poor are less likely than girls to be in paid work at the age of 30.”

Reeves sees this new paradigm as the result of cultural shifts and economic challenges.

Take parenthood. Motherhood has expanded in recent decades to include both the domestic sphere and breadwinning, but fatherhood has not similarly adapted to the times. He writes that the American model of father-as-provider, and mother-as-dependent, has transformed in recent decades, while “culture and policy are stuck on an obsolete model of fatherhood, lagging way behind economic reality,” leaving men in limbo, alienated from what society views as their traditional breadwinner role, but reluctant to take on culturally unfamiliar ones, like caregiving.

But a backward glance at historical American norms seems to reveal that the quietly vanishing male breadwinner

“For some men, the answer is to detach from family and its attendant obligations—and to attach to alcohol and drugs.”

is not necessarily taking time-honored binary gender roles with him.

In her 1992 book *The Way We Never Were*, professor of history and family studies Stephanie Coontz describes the traditional American nuclear family—father, mother, children living in a single-family dwelling, on a single income—as an anomaly in the grand sweep of history. Coontz says this paradigm was a uniquely post-WWII phenomenon, made possible by government policies that both shaped and reinforced the gender roles of the nuclear family archetype. The 1950s twin ideals of the pioneering Ingalls family, toughing it out in their little house on the prairie, and the breadwinning suburban pater familias, she argues, existed in the American psyche thanks to some significant, often unacknowledged assists from the federal government: in Pa Ingalls’ case, land grants and the Homestead Act; for Ward Cleaver, the GI bill, VA home loans, the Federal Housing Authority, and the national highway system.

She details the informal networks and community cooperation that undergirded life for both rich and poor for most of America’s early history—if the “rugged individual” had ever existed, he stood on quite a few shoulders.

Writing in the early 1990s, Coontz anticipates *Of Boys and Men*, outlining

the way postwar economic and societal changes slowly enervated the roles of breadwinning male and domestic female. In her view, these zombie archetypes led to America’s *Bowling Alone*-style individual isolation.

In Coontz’s theory, the Industrial Revolution first decoupled work from home, accelerating an emerging compartmentalization of the domestic from the public. The domestic sphere was female, sentimental, and emotional. The public arena was male: individualistic, rational, and competitive, the product of Enlightenment and Romantic individualism and Darwinist liberal capitalism. There, no one was owed anything.

*The Way We Never Were* is at pains to illustrate how government intervention, public policy, and cultural mores in the 19th century became centered around preserving the model of the standalone, wage-earning male breadwinner, with a dependent wife and children. But “for thousands of years, any family that needed to work understood that everyone in that family needed to work,” Coontz wrote in *Time* magazine, more recently, in 2013. “There was no such term as ‘male breadwinner.’ Throughout the colonial America era, wives were called ‘yokemates’ or ‘deputy husbands.’”

Home became the acceptable realm for the private self, and the nuclear family of the Victorian middle class became the ideal and the aspiration, Coontz wrote in her book. Marriage became more than a societal expectation, and was pitched as the pinnacle of personal fulfillment. The culture celebrated the beatific stay-at-home wife and mother who had abundant time and energy to devote to her family’s flourishing. Conveniently overlooked were the child, immigrant, and minority exploitation that often made it all possible, and only then for a select few. Reeves reminds readers that the 20th-century patriarchy did not always serve men particularly well (see: Loman, Willy).

Per Coontz, this nuclear family idyll made Americans’ world small, truncating our “sense of larger social obligations and commitments.” So if the perfect American family was out of reach, as it was for many, or if it failed

to totally affirm or fulfill you, as it inevitably would, where was there left to go?

For some men, the answer is to detach from family and its attendant obligations—and to attach to alcohol and drugs. In a video testimonial on St. Christopher’s website, a father in recovery recalls using drugs and getting drunk in the bathroom at a Little League game. For others, substance abuse offered an escape from an unhappy family life. Another Brother Christopher in recovery, Todd, recalls in his testimonial the death of his father at age 9. Afterward, he said, “I was rebellious. I didn’t want to go to school, I didn’t want to do anything.” He said he began using drugs at around the age of 12 or 13. “I had a very low self-esteem. No self-worth.”

What Reeves calls “male malaise” isn’t restricted to a particular class or race (even if some are particularly affected—deaths of despair are disproportionately among white working-class men, and the Obama Foundation’s MBK initiative says that Black males born 25 years ago have only a 1 in 2 chance of being employed today). Kevin Douglas, director of counseling and sheltering at St. Christopher’s, said they see attorneys, police detectives, teachers, and professors come through their doors.

Male malaise also predates COVID.

*Of Boys and Men* references a 2018 piece in *Harper’s* by Barrett Swanson, titled “Men at Work.” It is an account of attending Evryman, a three-day secular men’s retreat, alongside finance guys, Special Forces veterans, and scientists. Swanson describes “a derby of self-expression”: brutally honest personal testimonials, a primal scream “anger ceremony” in the woods, an intense holotropic breathing session. His melancholy conclusion imagines his fellow attendees returning at the retreat’s end to the “private loneliness” of the real world.

Swanson paints a vivid picture of a single neighbor, who he surmised worked in big tech, in his 30s. He recalls overhearing the man’s weekly solo ritual of playing videogames through the weekend, and “the sadness I experienced listening to him holed up for days

on end in front of a screen, blasting Elder Dragons or whatever.”

Like Reeves and Coontz, Swanson looks to early America, where he says men were evaluated less by their “chest-thumping machismo,” than their value to the community around them. “Creditors were neighbors and kinsmen were clients,” Swanson quotes historian E. Anthony Rotundo. “A man’s failure at work was never a private concern.” Even before the era of COVID alienation, Swanson was suggesting that the men flocking to CrossFit gyms, Evryman, the Proud Boys, and Jordan Peterson lectures were indicating a keenly felt absence of ready-made community and ways of being for men.

Swanson sees a type of gender essentialism in the tendency to blame undesirable male behavior on “toxic masculinity.” It ignores the structural reasons men may be struggling with certain behaviors like substance abuse—the mirror image of male chauvinists ascribing emotional irrationality to women. In *Of Boys and Men*, Reeves sees a parallel between contemporary masculinity and the circumstances of mid-20th-century women. To wit, Coontz describes in *The Way We Never Were* the fractured self of the midcentury American housewife, unmoored by twin pressures—virtually unprecedented—to be both a singly devoted mother, and the sole source of sexual and emotional fulfillment for her spouse. In reaction to these ahistorical expectations, she writes that tranquilizer use (“developed in the 1950s in response to a need that physicians explicitly saw as female”) and drinking among women during this time, increased dramatically.

Saying that conversations with the men in his social circle had begun to resemble “unofficial therapy sessions,” Swanson writes: “Several of these men struggled with addiction and depression, or other conditions that could be named, but the more common complaint was something vaguer—a quiet desperation that, if I were forced to generalize, seemed to stem from a gnawing sense of purposelessness.”

How similar this life of aimless unease, “Elder Dragons or whatever,” and substances sounds to what Coontz

describes as “the four B’s” of the reality of the 1950s housewife: “booze, bowling, bridge, and boredom.”

“I’m 73 and I have a purpose,” said Bob Conboy, after proudly showing me around San Damiano Farm, a small, self-sustaining farm that has been operative at St. Christopher’s Inn since 2017, according to their website. Conboy, who was turning compost on a tractor when we met, oversees operations at San Damiano. It is impressive, with a drip irrigation system and a hoop house (a type of greenhouse popular in organic farming) built by the residents. The structure, Conboy said, enables them to grow heirloom tomatoes in December. Even on a gray February day, the promise of the beauty of the Hudson Valley’s full flourishing can be glimpsed. The men were already growing flowers for Mother’s Day.

In the warmer months, San Damiano hosts a farmers market, and Conboy and Schilling spoke familiarly to each other about some regulars of their shared acquaintance. Schilling said Graymoor enjoys local name recognition. A Cold Spring, New York, farm-to-table restaurant boasts a “Graymoor Salad” made with produce grown and tended by Conboy and the residents (thanks to a knifing-specialty training available through St. Christopher’s vocational readiness service, upon leaving, Schilling said residents can “get hired in a minute” at restaurants in nearby Peekskill, New York).

Working on the farm is part of residents’ transition once they leave the more intensive treatment at St. Christopher’s Inn. Residents work part of the day at the farm, spending the other part focusing on recovery and attending meetings.

I spoke with a resident at San Damiano who was working the greenhouse. He said he liked the ability to “bring life from nothing.” And he is excited to bring his newly acquired horticultural skills back to his family’s landscaping business. He told me he had just gotten off the phone with his mom. “Things have changed,” he said he told her. Now, he said, there’s “a new game plan.”

He told me he is looking forward to

giving back once he leaves. “My recovery has been so great,” he said.

Both Schiller and Weeks tout St. Christopher’s alumni services, a proud network of graduated Brothers Christopher in recovery. “Hundreds of alumni return every year” to the annual Homecoming picnic the Graymoor site says, “to celebrate their recovery with the Friars and staff who helped them on their journey.”

Maintaining that kind of network is remarkable. Although the bulk of their clientele come from New York City, according to Weeks, others come from around the tri-state area, and the ratios of ethnicities and age varies from season to season.

“After care is a big issue,” said Weeks. I ask whether the kind of post-departure reach-back services St. Christopher’s offers their alumni are typical.

“Probably not,” he said.

For up to three months after they leave, he said, recovering Brothers Christopher can access assistance to get the resources they need to coordinate with insurance companies, arrange transportation, or even return to St. Christopher’s for appointments and help filling prescriptions if they face lengthy wait times at home.

Schiller, who worked with addicted people in the Bronx for 30 years, said after treatment at other places, it is much more common for people to simply “disappear.” But working at Graymoor, as he has for almost the past three years, is different. “Here,” he said, “I run into people all the time.”

This kind of community connection is becoming increasingly rare, particularly for men. “Social circles have been shrinking for men and women, especially since the pandemic,” Daniel De Visé wrote in a recent article for *The Hill*, reporting on Pew research indicating that young men today are single at twice the rate of young women.

“But men struggle more,” De Visé writes. “Thirty years ago, 55% of men reported having six or more close friends. By 2021, that share had slipped to 27%.”

In a play on the feminist slogan, “A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle,” Reeves asks in *Of Boys and*

*Men*, “What is a bicycle for in a world of fish?” The previous pattern for men of job, marriage, then children has become less paradigmatic in the last 50 years, just as women have become more active in the workplace. The culture, Reeves believes, has failed to produce a new model for men that reflects new cultural realities. Womanhood has adapted; the term “working mother,” he points out, already sounds antiquated.

Reeves cites a 2019 study, “Tenuous Attachments of Working Class Men,” in his book. It concluded that with little on the horizon to take the place of three institutions: work, the nuclear family, and organized religion, working-class men faced an environment of *anomie*, or normlessness. Anomie is a term popularized by 19th-century French sociologist Emile Durkheim, to which he attributed rising suicide rates in his time. When schools, businesses, houses of worship, and parks closed a year after the study was published, what norms were left disappeared.

St. Christopher’s is very normative: Signs for choir practice, every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday at 9 p.m. are ubiquitous. There is even a regimented process for serving lunch, with the men quietly queuing up at the appointed time.

The inn’s president and spiritual director, Father Dennis Polanco, a man with a gentle demeanor followed around by a little dog named Joey, takes me to the chapel where he says Mass on Sundays and a few days a week (attendance is optional for the men). There, he said, every afternoon at 4:45, all the men come for a rough approximation of what in religious communities would be called Vespers, the evening recitation of the Psalms. However, these Brothers Christopher of various (or no) faiths gather to meditate on the 11th step of Alcoholics Anonymous: “prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood God.”

Together, the men reflect on their day following a prescribed order of service referred to as evening meditation. They begin with the Serenity Prayer, followed by a reading from the AA “24

Hour Book” of daily recovery readings and meditations, and an opportunity to bring forward intentions. After a time of silence, the men recite the 11th step. Evening meditation concludes with the prayer of St. Francis, author of the Friars’ rule. By pure coincidence, this prayer is part of AA’s Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, known by members simply as the “twelve and twelve.”

It is a plea for purpose and transformation: “Make me an instrument of your peace,” the prayer’s opening line reads.

For these men, who have often lost their jobs, Director of Counseling Kevin Douglas said that they leave St. Christopher’s with a renewed sense of purpose (that word comes up a lot), “ready to try again.”

If the Friars’ system of everyone living together, rule-following, and regimented schedules sounds a little militaristic, in some cases, the parallels may be intentional.

Father Matt Pawlikowski is the Catholic chaplain for the Corps of Cadets across the Hudson at West Point. An academy graduate himself, he served as an officer before going to seminary to become a Catholic priest, eventually becoming an army chaplain.

At seminary, he noticed a lot of similarities to West Point. “There’s too many similarities for this to just be coincidence,” Pawlikowski said, remembering his thinking at the time.

But it was more than the early wake-ups, uniform clerical outfits, strict schedules, menial tasks, and austere common living. “The seminary has a formation program,” he said. “And so does West Point. So West Point educates, but it also forms.” Where instruction at West Point is oriented toward instilling duty and honor into cadets, he said, “the seminary would have slightly different formation, but still, there’s

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a formation. You're trying to form the soul, the character of the person."

After some inquiries, he discovered a possible reason: "[West Point founder] Sylvanus Thayer visited the Grand Seminary of the Sulpicians when he was looking for textbooks," he said. While in France in the early 1800s, looking for mathematical and engineering textbooks, Thayer encountered this society of priests, founded in 17th-century France, dedicated to the formation of both seminarians and ordained priests. According to other priests Pawlikowski asked, Thayer adapted the Sulpicians' formation program.

Pawlikowski said he once mentioned this connection to a member of the Sulpicians. "He said, 'Of course there is, everybody knows that.' I said, 'Everybody does *not* know that.' He says, 'Every Sulpician knows it.'"

As it turns out, Pawlikowski's acquaintance wasn't quite accurate.

Father Ronald Witherup, who recently stepped down from his post as superior general of the worldwide community of Sulpicians after 14 years, was unfamiliar with the supposed West Point-Sulpician connection. He said it was plausible, though.

Thayer "probably saw in the Sulpician model a pretty well-oiled, functioning machine that would serve well for some place like West Point," Witherup said. "The idea of the combination of discipline, obedience, structure." Instead of army bugles, the rhythm of the day was structured by bells, he said: wake up, pray, meditation, Mass, meals, and recreation. Just as the purpose of West Point is to prepare cadets for service (the school's motto is "Duty, Honor, Country"), for seminarians, the Sulpician idea is to train missionary disciples for evangelization.

And just as your brother Franciscans notice if you're missing at Vespers, and your Brothers Christopher notice if you aren't at evening meditation, upperclassmen notice if you aren't in your barracks when they come around to make sure you're in your room at night after the bugle plays "Taps" at 11:30.

Recently, the National Bureau of Economic Research found an increase in

middle-aged mortality, not observed in other countries, that accompanied a national decline in religiosity that began in the 1980s. The researchers also found that states with the largest increases in deaths of despair were those states where religious attendance had also dropped the most. Congruently, their research showed that the decline in religiosity was often preceded by the repeal of so-called "blue laws," which prohibit economic activity, usually on Sunday mornings. Commerce became more convenient, but norms that at their best provided accountability and facilitated a reason to get together with extended family and community, appear to have consequently eroded.

When pandemic policies forced millions into extended isolation in 2020, commerce was facilitated even further with the proliferation of no-contact shopping and near-instantaneous home delivery. Plunged further into private loneliness, many men seemed to receive the message they feared most: that no one noticed, cared—they were maybe even better off—with them out of the picture. Reeves estimates in *Boys and Men* that because of opioids' distinguishing characteristics from other drugs (as painkillers, they don't boost confidence or energy, or alter experience), they can be viewed more as a "barometer" of male economic and social underachievement, than a cause. Users who die of opioid overdoses, he points out, are usually indoors, and frequently alone.

Incidentally, American young men's interest in dating or looking for a new relationship has declined since 2019. These days, it seems, "women don't need to be in long-term relationships," according to an LA psychologist quoted by De Visé in *The Hill*. "They don't need to be married. They'd rather go to brunch with friends than have a horrible date."

But researchers have noticed men's absence, and the data showing that men in America are struggling. What is less clear is whether anyone is listening who can *do* anything about it. And there are reasons to believe there is something to be done.

The combination of formation and purpose seems to be the secret sauce that has kept the Sulpicians in business since

the 1600s, even inspiring long-running spinoffs like the United States Military Academy. "There's certain keys to formation that work," Witherup said. All that is necessary is to "adapt to the unique situation that you're addressing."

The principles are transferable. "Formation is formation," he said. No matter who the object, "a lot of issues are the same."

Richard Reeves seems to ascribe to the adaptable formation model. Boys, who mature later, should perhaps start school a year later than their female peers, he suggests in his book. He also advocates forming men for traditionally female-dominated professions, in what he calls the HEAL fields: health, education, administration, and literacy.

"Be quick to see where religious people are right," counsels the "Big Book" of Alcoholics Anonymous. "Make use of what they offer."

This seems to have been Sylvanus Thayer's approach in borrowing his formation program for young American officers from some French priests. The result has persisted into the present day, adapting, as Witherup recommends, when women were admitted to the academy in the mid 1970s. Male formation does not have to be a zero-sum game at women's expense—Pawlikowski said that at a recent parade, he counted over half of the leaders in the Corps of Cadets were women. "Which, considering that we're 20% women, that's a substantial number."

The mission of St. Christopher's is in keeping with the Friars' mission of At-one-ment, uniting the fractured selves of the men to whom they open their doors. In addition to the medical and psychiatric interventions they provide, they also give the men something that is increasingly rare in the wider society: expectations, roles to fulfill, somewhere to be—and a reason to be there. ■

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# Open Kibbeh

BY CAROL UNGAR

## INGREDIENTS

- ½ cup fine bulgar wheat
- ⅓ cup olive oil
- 2 garlic cloves, crushed
- 1 green chile, finely chopped
- 12 oz minced lamb
- 1 tsp ground allspice
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- 1 tsp ground coriander
- 2 Tbsp roughly chopped coriander
- ⅔ cup pine nuts
- 3 Tbsp roughly chopped flat leaf parsley
- 2 Tbsp self-rising flour (plus a little extra if needed)
- ½ cup light tahini
- 2 tsp lemon juice
- 1 tsp sumac
- Salt and black pepper

## PREPARATION

### Step 1

Preheat oven to 375. Line a spring form cake pan with greaseproof paper.

### Step 2

Place the bulgar in a large bowl and cover it with 1 1/4 cup of water. Leave for 50 minutes.

### Step 3

Meanwhile, heat 4 Tbsp. of olive oil in a large frying pan. Saute the garlic, onion, and chile until they are completely soft. Remove everything from pan, then return it to high heat, adding the lamb. Cook for five minutes, stirring constantly until brown.

### Step 4

Return the onion mixture to the pan and add cinnamon, allspice, coriander, 1/2 tsp. salt, a generous grind of black pepper, and most of the pine nuts and parsley, leaving some aside. Cook for a few minutes, remove from heat, taste, and adjust seasoning.

### Step 5

Check the bulgar to see that the water has been absorbed. Strain to remove any remaining liquid. Add the flour, 1 Tbsp. of olive oil, 1/4 tsp. salt and a pinch of black pepper and knead into a mixture that barely holds together. Add a bit more flour if it's very sticky. Push firmly into the base of the tin so that it is compacted and leveled. Spread the lamb mixture evenly on top and press it down a little. Bake in the oven for about 20 minutes or until the meat is quite a dark brown and very hot.

### Step 6

While you wait, whisk together the tahini paste with the lemon juice, 1/4 cup of water, and a pinch of salt. You are after a very thick yet pourable sauce. If needed, add a tiny amount of extra water.

### Step 7

Remove the kibbeh cake from the oven, spread the tahini sauce evenly on top, sprinkle with reserved pine nuts and chopped parsley and return to the oven immediately. Bake for 10-12 minutes until tahini is just settling and has taken on a little bit of color and the pine nuts are golden.

### Step 8

Remove from the oven and leave to cool until warm or room temperature. Before serving, sprinkle the top with the sumac and a drizzle of olive oil. Carefully remove the sides of the tin and cut the kibbeh into slices. Lift them gently so they won't break.



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