

THE TAB

CONTENTS

Vol. 2 Issue 26

- 1
Why Would Hasidic Parents Send Their Kids to Failing Schools?
 Yeshivas are being attacked for their lack of careerism while critics ignore what religious families actually want and get from their schools
- 4
Nancy Isabelle
 Fiction: The lost final chapter of Isaac Bashevis Singer's 'Enemies: A Love Story'
- 8
I, Sea Jew
 Jews and water don't mix
- 10
First Resorts
 The history of the Jewish Catskills before the Borscht Belt was born
- 12
Why Are So Many Kosher Restaurants So Bad?
 The laws of kashrut indirectly affect non-food-related aspects of the kosher culinary industry
- 15
The Austerity Diet
 Looking back on how Israelis dealt with food rationing in the first years after independence—and who bore the burden of feeding their families

NEWS

Why Would Hasidic Parents Send Their Kids to Failing Schools?

Yeshivas are being attacked for their lack of careerism while critics ignore what religious families actually want and get from their schools

BY FRIEDA VIZEL

The latest salvo in *The New York Times'* ongoing exposé of the yeshiva system in New York focused on a new report issued by the New York City Department of Education that found 18 religious schools failing to meet secular education standards set by the government. The article raised some troubling questions but ignored one of the most important: Why do Hasidic parents continue to send their children to “failing schools?”

I am a former Hasid who makes a living as a tour guide and YouTuber exploring Hasidic Williamsburg, where many of these implicated Hasidic schools are located. Since I am in the neighborhood often, I have come to know the rhythm of the schools that are at the center of the ongoing controversy. Every day I watch hundreds of happy boys spill into the streets during recess and pile into buses at the end of the afternoon. I see children who are deeply cared for. I see a neighborhood with one of the lowest median ages in the country, where life revolves around raising the

young. Furthermore, I see parents who pay private school tuition to send their children to these schools. So why, if they are failing, do the schools continue to burst at the seams?

There are times when parents don't have a choice. When a couple splits, one of the parents can end up in a contractual obligation to enroll their children in specific Orthodox institutions. In other situations, there may be social pressures that leave parents with few real options. These things do happen, but I believe they represent a minority of cases.

The majority of Hasidic parents send their children to these schools because they succeed by some significant metrics. That doesn't offset the ways in which they fall short. But in a holistic accounting that considers not only their efficiency as preparatory institutions for future workers but also the social value they provide, these so-called failing schools accomplish a great deal. Perhaps much more than an ordinary public school.

First and foremost, these schools are Talmud Torahs—institutions dedicated to the study of Jewish texts. This is what

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the boys spend the bulk of their time in school doing, and it is a yeshiva's *raison d'être*. According to Eli Spitzer, a Hasidic boys' school headmaster, the Torah study is not as rigorous as yeshiva defenders often portray it. "In elementary and middle school, many hours are spent singing songs, listening to stories, and repeating material that has already been learned. In high school, meanwhile, most of the day is devoted to unstructured learning. This, for many students, consists primarily of socializing while absorbing a tiny amount of material."

Beyond providing their formal curriculum, these schools socialize boys, helping them grow into Hasidic men. The boys spend their days cultivating a

special piety, earnestness, and curiosity, as well as a strong sense of belonging. Girls, meanwhile, are socialized in modesty in schools of their own. This is not taught at a designated period during the school day but rather is the cumulative product of the culture in these yeshivas.

As a mother having once sent my son to a Satmar boys' school, I would argue that the most important function these schools provide is the help they offer to families. Hasidic boys' schools are in a league of their own in getting children out from under their mother's *fartich*—from under her feet. Mothers tell me that the boys are in school so many hours because "boys need to study the holy Torah," but I think there's more to it: Unlike the girls who help run the household, families—which often live in small apartments—need the boys and men to leave daily.

Among Williamsburg Hasidic sects, the boys start school from as young as two-and-a-half years old and remain in the system until marriage. They are in school six days a week, all year round. They are bused from the family's home and dropped back off at the door at the end of the day. They are kept busy all day without any screens. They get served multiple meals in school. They don't usually bring home homework or need to prepare for tests. Notably, they don't even go to school with backpacks. Everything they need is there at the school. The day gets longer as they get older: After Bar Mitzvah comes *fartuks* (study at dawn) and *masmidim* (study late in the evening). While in the secular world educators bristle at any insinuation that they are babysitters, Hasidic schools plainly take on the task of easing the burden for parents. They also seek to address students' emotional needs.

It is an irony of the current debate that liberals who believe in strong social safety nets, who would balk at the assertion that a person should be judged by their wealth or career attainment, and who once celebrated the maxim made famous by Hillary Clinton, 'It takes a village to raise a child,' seem incapable of appreciating those same values when they come from religious communities.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when public schools shut down, causing long-term emotional and academic damage to students, Hasidic schools continued to operate, often underground, and even after some were raided and closed by the NYPD. While these moves were controversial, the same schools that have been singled out by the *Times* put their necks out for their students and parents—sparing them some of the terrible losses that were suffered by students in other institutions.

But the critical reports from *The New York Times* and from the Department of Education don't focus on the ways these schools serve as vital organs to Hasidic communities. Instead, they focus on what the Hasidic schools don't do: They do not prepare the boys to be efficient workers and reliable consumers inside of mainstream, secular economic arrangements. And this is true. Hasidic schools don't do the kind of career prep that can help students become future brand managers, corporate tax consultants, or equity administrators. It seems that in the wider world, people are so used to conflating education with economic preparation—because this is what modern education has become—that they assume that Hasidic schools seek to do the same.

Some conclude that since Hasidic boys study Torah, the goal of their schools must be to make them rabbis. As Naftuli Moster, the founder of Yaffed, an organization pushing for more government intervention in Yeshiva education, told *The Washington Post*, "Every boy is groomed and destined to be a rabbi of some sort." But Hasidic schools don't prepare children for careers as rabbis; in fact, they don't prepare them for any career at all.

A short while after Hasidic boys marry, they often go out to work. They don't have any formal training, and their English might be broken, but they have a community that serves as an economic network, and they are immersed in a culture of hustlers. As I've explored in a video on how Hasidim earn a living, the community's local economy of mom-and-pop shops compensates for the disadvantages the boys have in not

being fluent in English or traditionally prepared for careers. It remains true that poverty rates are very high, but I believe the main cause of this is the high cost of living: New York City's Hasidim have large families, live in one of the most expensive cities in the world, and pay the price for expensive kosher food, a rich calendar of holidays and festivities, and private schools. Hasidim also live in geographically concentrated areas in order to be within walking distance of the synagogue and close to their families. This drives up property values to an incredible degree.

All of this doesn't mean that Hasidic parents don't have criticisms of their sons' schools. In fact, I believe the debate over Hasidic education stems, in part, from internal frustrations. As someone who is on the periphery, parents talk to me candidly about the things that bother them. Plenty have complaints about education, as parents will have anywhere, and I hear especially about the state of "English" for boys. Parents tell me they don't want to raise New York-born boys who struggle to speak the language of the land and who do not know the basics in math, spelling, history, and so on. But at the same time, these parents value the many things they *do* get from the schools, and would by no means want the good to go away.

Hasidic boys' schools have come a long way from the days of Rabbi Eli Hecht, who, in his memoir, *Crossing the Williamsburg Bridge*, recalls a miserable *cheydar* in 1950s Brooklyn. At the helm of Hecht's class was an intimidating, if not abusive, Holocaust survivor who terrorized the students with his *shteken*—his dreaded stick. Today's Hasidic parents would hardly stand for such things. They demand well-orchestrated Chumash parties, upgraded arts and crafts programs, gentler and more energetic teachers, and swim and other

summer programs. They are attuned to the trends in treatment for ADHD, dyslexia, and other learning issues. Things are changing, albeit in ways more complicated than state metrics can capture.

When it comes to secular education in yeshiva, however, change can be much harder, as it can be perceived as a demand for less Torah—and thus an assault on the sacred. The issue brings up old fault lines from the days of yore, when reformers in Europe tried to get religious Jews to *get with the times* by forcing change in the yeshivas. Just a few years ago I came across a Yiddish poster in Hasidic Williamsburg that read: "In the year 1887 the government forced secular subjects into the Yeshiva of Volozhin ... The yeshiva had to be closed ... And therefore the Ntzi"v warned his son to stand guard and not to allow in the mixing of secular with the holy in yeshivas." The poster ended with a cry: "We'll stand for pure education, without negotiations!"

In other words, these debates about yeshivas are debates about values. Some in the community have told me that they believe the government wants to push things like LGBTQ, race theory, and other "leftist agendas." But even among those who are less politically minded, there's a lot of anxiety about being able to raise children according to Hasidic values. After all, while some Hasidic schools may not teach traditional history, the community is not ignorant of the long history of religious persecution.

So how do you change some things without losing others? How do you change the curriculum without destroying the essence of a system that many in the community feel is working well?

The poor state of secular education in many Hasidic schools doesn't come from apathy or negligence. Rather, these schools have several competing priorities. There are ways in which the schools fail but also, importantly, ways in which they deliver. This is why, despite all the damning reports, Hasidic schools continue to prosper. ■

This article was originally published on July 17, 2023.



Album of the Week

Anohni, *My Back Was a Bridge for You to Cross*

Lou Reed, who died in 2013, gets his own postmortem on Anohni's astonishing new album *My Back Was a Bridge for You to Cross*. The album's third track, "Sliver of Ice," recalls a moment near the end of Reed's life, when, Anohni tells Björk in *Interview* magazine, "his carer put a piece of ice on his tongue, and he called me up having these ecstatic physical experiences. He was just getting more and more grateful for the feeling of being alive, and it was inspiring."

Anohni captures this through a simple guitar and drums and her incredible falsetto. "Now that I'm almost gone / Sliver of ice on my tongue / In the day's night / It tastes so good, it felt so right / For the first time in my life," she sings at the beginning, before working into the song's stunning ending, "And I love you so much more, I love you so much more, I never knew it before." The listener might not know she's channeling Reed—Björk thought it was about alcoholism—but Anohni's voice is one that refuses passive listening.

Elsewhere, Anohni offers a celebration of life. A Marvin Gaye influence runs throughout *My Back*, especially on the fourth track, "Can't." A slice of Northern Soul filled to the brim with horns and vigor..

—David Meir Grossman

SCIENCE

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Nancy Isabelle

The lost final chapter of Isaac Bashevis Singer's 'Enemies: A Love Story'

BY ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER

Isaac Bashevis Singer's 'Enemies, a Love Story,' was originally serialized in the Yiddish daily 'Forverts' in 1966 and appeared in English translation in 1972 (the Yiddish original was republished in 2022, for the first time in book form, as 'Sonim, di geshikhte fun a libe,' by the Swedish publisher Oliansky Tekst). Singer revised his original text throughout the translation process, but one emendation stands out: the complete elimination of an additional female character, Nancy Isabelle, the intelligent, educated, impulsive, funny, and generous Jewish American woman who makes an appearance in the final chapters of the Yiddish version. Perhaps on the advice of his editors, all references to Nancy—a semi-assimilated yet religiously curious young woman who exudes a brash confidence—were cut from the English novel. With permission from the Isaac Bashevis Singer Literary Trust, Tablet is republishing this lost chapter here. We imagine, after reading it, that some readers may feel that the loss of Nancy was a loss to Singer's canon, and maybe even to Yiddish literature in general.

Here, then, is Nancy Isabelle.

—Rachel Mines

After Passover, business in Reb Abraham Nissen Yaroslaver's bookstore slowed to a crawl. Days went by without a single customer. Tamara was away again, working in New Jersey. Herman rummaged among the books, leafing through the *Midrash Tanhuma* or the *Kedushat Levi*, the *Mishna Berurah* or the *Mesilat Yesharim*. All the books had things to say, but their words only repeated the words of others.

A rabbi with a red beard and thick glasses came in to browse. Peering myopically—his beard resting on the yellow pages, which the lenses of his glasses were almost touching—he seemed to be inhaling the Hebrew letters. He sighed from time to time and told Herman his life story. The Nazis had murdered his wife and children. He himself had ended up in Shanghai, where he'd become the head of a yeshiva. He'd published commentaries by the medieval scholars Shlomo ben Aderet and Yom Tov of Seville. Then the Japanese liquidated the yeshiva. Now he had a little prayer house in Brooklyn, but the

congregation came to pray only on Sabbath afternoons, and sometimes not even then. They learned no Torah, asked no questions about religion. What kind of rabbi was he? The leader of a Jewish community, he was forced to advertise in the newspapers. You need to be on good terms with reporters—even bribe them. Rabbis and their wives have to invite heretic Jewish scribblers into their homes just to get them to put a notice in the papers. If you didn't, you never got anywhere. Well, praise be to the Lord above—America is a free country. That's *all* it is, if you didn't have a family, but we mustn't complain to the Lord of the Universe.

The rabbi asked Herman, "You're a Torah scholar, is that right?"

"I've studied."

"So you know that everything God does is for the best?"

"What kind of good did Hitlerism bring us?"

"What do we know? When you give a child castor oil, he cries and doesn't want to swallow it. But his father knows the child needs medicine to clear out his blocked digestive system. If he didn't drink castor oil, heaven forbid, he

could get seriously ill. All our sufferings are to test and purify us."

"Little children don't need purification."

"We don't know God's ways. If we could know God, we'd be God."

The rabbi found a book of biblical interpretations. He wanted to buy it, but the price Tamara had put on it was more than he could afford. Herman reduced the price and the rabbi was about to pay, but after looking in all his pockets, it turned out he'd left his wallet at home. Or perhaps he'd been robbed? New York was full of thieves. The rabbi scratched nervously under his shirt. He didn't even have money for the subway. Herman gave him the book on credit and change for the subway. The rabbi said, "You have a Jewish heart."

As soon as the rabbi left, in came a young woman with short, blonde hair that sprang up from her head like a brush. She had an enormous handbag hanging off one shoulder, tucked under her arm like a portfolio. The brows over her pale eyes joined in the middle. She had a short nose and full lips without lipstick. She was dressed like a man. The small bow around the small collar of her shirt looked like a necktie. Her shoes had low heels. She was surely a lesbian, Herman thought. The woman had a voice that sounded neither feminine nor masculine. She addressed Herman in English.

"What do you have on the Kabbalah?"

Herman consulted his catalogue.

"We have Rabbi Moses of Cordova's *Pardes Rimonim*."

"I've got that one."

"Rabbi Isaac Luria's *Etz Chayim*."

"I've got that one, too."

"Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto's *Klale Pit'he Hokhma*."

"What's that?"

"An introduction to the Kabbalah."

"That's one I need."

"You're studying the Kabbalah?"

"I'm writing a paper on it."

"I have another introduction to the Kabbalah—*Shefa Tal*."

"Give me everything you've got."

Herman went looking for the books. The young woman lit a cigarette. She even smoked like a man: She held the

cigarette aslant and exhaled smoke through her nostrils. A masculine energy blazed in her eyes, together with the stubborn determination of a woman who'd taken on a man's responsibilities. Herman found the *Shefa Tal*—it was a large volume—but the *Klale Pit'he Hokhma* seemed to have been misplaced. He asked, "Do you know Hebrew?"

"I know a little, and I use dictionaries."

"You're writing a dissertation?"

"Yes—but I'd like it to be more than a dissertation. There are hardly any works on the Kabbalah in English. The ones that do exist are good for nothing but firewood."

"Please sit down. I'll try to find the book."

There was a chair, and the new arrival perched on the edge of its seat. Although her shoes had low heels, Herman noticed her legs were slender, her ankles slim. Her knees weren't rounded, but girlishly—or boyishly—knobbly.

Herman asked, "How on earth did you get interested in the Kabbalah?"

"Through William Blake."

"Do your parents live in New York?"

"My mother is dead. My father's a colonel in the American Army. Right now he's in Korea."

"Well, that's America for you."

Herman found the *Klale Pit'he Hokhma*. The young woman opened the volume and read the title page aloud. Herman was struck by the fact that she made not a single error. She asked the price and passed Herman a ten-dollar bill. Herman hesitated. "I need to go get change. You're my first customer today."

"What else do you have? I'm interested in Hasidism, too."

Herman sold her a *Mei Ha'Shiloach*. The three books came to just over ten dollars, leaving her fifty cents short. He began to pack up the books anyway. The young woman said, "Excuse me—that's not how it's done."

She took the sheets of wrapping paper from his hands and he noticed that her fingers were long, with pointed nails. She had ink stains on her fingers, like a high school student.

"Where did you learn Hebrew?"

"I had a teacher at university. My father's Christian, but my mother was Jewish. Her father was president of the

synagogue in Chattanooga. According to religious law, I'm Jewish too."

"Yes, it comes down from the mother."

"You're from Eastern Europe?"

Herman explained where he came from. She asked how he'd survived, and he told her the truth.

"What time do you finish work?"

"Usually six, but right now, after Passover, there are hardly any customers."

"Lock up the store, and let's go for coffee. Maybe you can give me some pointers. These books are completely confusing. They call the same thing by different names, and each author has his own jargon. Is there somewhere nearby we can go?"

"There's a dairy restaurant just down the street."

"Come on, let's go. Or do you have to go home?"

"No, I don't."

"Good Lord in heaven—I haven't even told you my name. I'm Nancy Isabelle. And you are?"

"Herman Broder."

"Do you have a family?"

"I married the woman who hid me."

"She's Christian?"

"She's Jewish now."

"So what's the difference between Kabbalah and Hasidism?"

Herman explained while he locked up the store. Nancy asked, "Does anyone ever steal Jewish books?"

"My biggest fear is that someone will break in and give me more."

Nancy smiled and her face turned young, girlish. They walked to the dairy restaurant. On the way, she told him her life story. Her parents didn't get along and had separated. Nancy had grown up with her mother, who—maybe to spite her husband—had tried to teach her about Judaism. She'd gone to the Reform synagogue's Sunday school. A Hebrew teacher came to her home to give lessons. Her mother had inherited money from her parents. Nancy had always wanted to be Jewish. When she was still in high school, she assembled a library on Jews and Judaism. She'd studied Martin Buber, Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* in English translation, and the stories of the Talmud. In college she'd taken a Hebrew course. At Columbia University, where she'd gone

after graduating from college, she'd completely immersed herself in Jewish philosophy. Her father? No, he never remarried. He was a professional military man. And herself? Oh, there's a lot to tell. She'd gotten married and divorced. Someone Jewish? No, Christian—an astronomy professor. But it didn't work out. How long has she been divorced? Three years now ...

There had been a time when the life stories Herman heard in America amazed him, even bewildered him. But gradually he'd adapted to American ways. America was not a melting pot, but a laboratory of innumerable new combinations. History moved easily here. People in the Old World got what they wanted through wars and revolutions. Here they succeeded through business, love affairs, marriage, divorce, university, jobs, travel. In the Old World there were mass migrations, victories on the battlefield, oppression, and persecution. But here in America, nothing would happen if Nancy Isabelle took up the Kabbalah.

Herman ate his dairy soup while he talked. Hasidism was a continuation of the Kabbalah of the Holy Ari—Rabbi Isaac Luria—although it was also a popularization of it, adapted to the

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Kosher Face

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conditions of Polish Jewry. Nancy had heard of the Hasidim who'd settled in Williamsburg. She wanted to visit them, to speak with their rabbis. But would they let a woman inside? Would they understand English? Did Herman know where to find them? Herman replied, "Why do you need so much Judaism? You saw what happened to the Jews in Europe."

"I don't think that's a good argument."

As he sat there with Nancy, Herman temporarily forgot his longing for Masha. After a while, Nancy began to ask questions, and he told her that Tamara had come back years after he'd thought she'd died. Nancy looked at him in shock.

"But that means you have two wives."

"That's right."

"A bigamist!"

"Yes, that's true."

"It's so strange. I'd thought of going into another bookstore, but for some reason I'm drawn to risk-takers. I took one look at you and my feet led me inside. What are you going to do?"

"I'm one of those people who doesn't do anything."

"Why not?"

"Because I've already tried, and nothing helps."

"In relation to other people—is that what you mean?"

"Something like that."

"What do you want to do?"

"Hide if I can."

"Where?"

"In a hayloft."

"Whenever I smell hay, I get a sneezing attack. Is that your interpretation of the Kabbalah?"

"According to the Kabbalah, this present world is the worst of all worlds. Kabbalists call it the woman of the abyss."

"Why specifically a woman?"

"Because women don't see the abyss."

"Oh, we do, all right. In Europe they killed just as many women as men."

Nancy wanted to pay the check, but Herman wouldn't let her. He snatched it out of her hand. They tugged it back and forth until she poked his forefinger with her nail. She flung down a fifty-cent tip.

Evening had fallen outside. Nancy took Herman's arm. "You're the first bigamist I've ever met."

"She drove quickly, easily and, it seemed, without any fear or sense of responsibility for the machine, which was capable of running over people and murdering its passengers."

Unbelievable! Nancy had parked near the house where Abraham Nissen Yaroslaver lived—the house where Tamara was staying. Herman said, "I've never met a woman who drives a car."

"I've been driving for 15 years. Not here in New York, of course."

Nancy got behind the wheel and lit a cigarette. Herman sat next to her. She announced, "We'll drive to Williamsburg—it's right over the bridge. Maybe we'll find something there."

She drove quickly, easily and, it seemed, without any fear or sense of responsibility for the machine, which was capable of running over people and murdering its passengers. She whizzed past other cars, smoking and talking the whole time. "What does it mean to believe? I can't comprehend it. How can people believe in something without a trace of evidence that it even exists? And how can they give up their lives for that kind of faith?"

"People sacrificed their lives for Hitler."

"Not for Hitler. For Germany."

"What's the use of Germany when you're dead?"

"Risking your life isn't the same as believing in something."

"Not just risking. People walked into certain death."

"That's just plain suicide. Where do

you think we'll find a rabbi? The human brain is a complete riddle. Take these kabbalists, for instance. They say thousands of things about God and about these worlds that no one's ever seen. They go into every tiny detail, just as if they'd climbed up to the heavens and visited the spheres, while all along they were just sitting in a synagogue or a cave and imagining things."

"If that's true, why are you so interested?"

"From a purely psychological standpoint." Nancy broke off. "Hey, you, son of a bitch!" she yelled. "Drivers like that should have their arms chopped off." Then she turned back to Herman. "Somewhere deep inside, I hope one of those mystics will find the truth, just as the ancient Greeks reasoned their way to atoms."

"Atoms are over and done with."

"All right, but they're still part of chemistry. Did you get married simply out of gratitude?"

"Because of the love that comes from gratitude."

"And you're happy? I married my husband because he taught me how to use a spectroscope. I was sure we'd sleep all day and be together all night, observing the star Sirius, or the moon. But then I stumbled across his enormous collection of pornography. And he drove me to have an affair with his best friend. On top of all that, he wrote bad poetry. Can you believe it?"

"Why not?"

"But why should you? Hey, over there, that looks like a synagogue."

The car stopped in front of a yeshiva. Nancy and Herman got out, and Herman opened the door to the building. In a dim room—half synagogue and half study hall—young men sat over their Talmuds, some wearing skullcaps, others in black, wide-brimmed hats. Some had beards and sidelocks, others had neither. Some swayed over their prayerbooks, singing the prayers softly to themselves. Others glanced up at the visitors in the doorway. Nancy said, "What are they studying?"

"Talmud."

"Which part?"

"Whether it's permitted to eat an egg that was laid on a holiday."

"I don't see a rabbi."

"This isn't a study hall for Hasidim."

"Come on, let's go find a rabbi."

Nancy drove the car up one street and down the next, but they couldn't find a rabbi. Soon she'd driven through the entire Hasidic neighborhood. "I'll drive you home if you like," she offered.

"Why should you do that?"

"What do you want me to do—go to a gangster movie? Some days my telephone never stops ringing and sometimes it doesn't ring at all. I pick up the receiver to make sure it's still working. It's the same way with letters and everything else. What made you become a bookseller?"

"The store belongs to my wife's uncle."

"The peasant wife?"

"No—the one who came back from Russia."

"Everything's so complicated for you immigrants. Was that your ambition—to run a bookstore?"

"What I really want is to hide somewhere."

"Like where?"

"Some farm, far away in Oregon or Wisconsin. To not have a telephone or neighbors. To not have a job—to eat potatoes with milk—that's all I want."

"How long could you stay there? For years I dreamed of an island. But there aren't any more islands or farms like the one you're imagining. Maybe they never existed. When I was married, my husband and I used to spout nonsense about having an observatory on top of a mountain, but it turned out to be a complete fantasy. My husband was always giving parties. The professors got drunk. And even if your farm does exist, how could you live there with no one but a wife who's completely uneducated?"

"In my daydreams it's different."

"I see. Here I was looking for a kabbalist, and I find a modern man with all the neuroses and whims. Who are you trying to run away from?"

"Nazis, Bolsheviks, all sorts of murderers. Every time I walk down the street, I know SS men are on the sidewalk right next to me. Maybe one of them shot my children. Other people on the same street are looking forward to revolutions, wars, one pogrom or another. Everyone's planning revenge

against the reactionaries, the progressives, the Jews, the whites, the Blacks. And right in the middle of this frenzy of murder and criminality, people go on babbling about our bright and glorious future. As far as I'm concerned, the world today is one big slaughterhouse. Any minute now, there will be a new slaughter, and while people are killing each other in one neighborhood, people on the other side of town will sing hymns of praise to the murderers, the crown of creation."

"Well, that's human history, sadly."

"I want to hide from human history."

"You can't hide from it, not in Oregon or Wisconsin or anywhere else. You know that. What does the Kabbalah have to say about the evil of the world?"

"God diminished his light so people can have the freedom to choose."

"Why?"

"So they can become good of their own free will. Or, put another way, by using their own power."

"Why does God need human beings?"

"God must have someone to care for. He is merciful, so obviously he needs someone to receive his mercy."

"So he created poor people just so he can hand out a few cents?"

"So it seems."

"You can't hide from a God like that. Of course I don't believe in God, and I don't believe in the Kabbalah, either—I don't believe in any kind of mystical teaching or philosophy. Once I toyed with Marxism, but that was a long time ago. The only driving force in my life is curiosity. I'll wait and see what new things the human brain will come up with."

Herman and Nancy fell into a long silence. Herman thought maybe they were lost. Nancy was driving down shadowy streets with stone paving or broken asphalt. There were low buildings that could have been factories or warehouses. This far from the city center, he could hear the silence. The air, already as warm as midsummer, stank of oil and smoke. Suddenly a bar came into sight. In its dim light, shadowy people slouched at the counter, drinking, talking drunkenly, swaying back and forth. Then all was silent and dark again.

A short while later, they were driving

along the seashore, or maybe down the length of a canal. Lamps swayed over the cargo ships; searchlights beamed down from above. Dirty water trickled from holes in tarry bulkheads. Herman read names that sounded Portuguese, Persian, Turkish. Aboard the ships, half-naked sailors were moving around, some smearing colored paint on bulkheads, some scrubbing decks, others spitting into the ocean. The water below was yellow, slimy, polluted with ancient filth. A melancholy nighttime sky, glowing with tropical heat, hovered over the masts, the cranes, the chimneys. But taken altogether, the scene had no substance. To Herman, it all seemed like a dream or a stage set in a theater.

"What kind of craziness is it to bring a child into this world?" Herman thought.

As if Nancy had read his mind, she spoke up. "I forgot to ask—do you and your second wife have children?"

"She's in her last few months of pregnancy."

"Well!"

Herman looked around. They were driving down Neptune Avenue. Nancy drove him right to his door. A few neighbors were still sitting outdoors on their chairs. Herman said, "Thank you very much. I mean it."

"I'll come for a browse in your bookstore another time. Maybe tomorrow."

"Yes, please do—you'd be very welcome. Thanks again."

Herman got out of the car and Nancy drove off. His neighbors interrupted their conversations and glared at Herman, their eyes full of surprise, contempt, and malice. They considered Herman a man with a bad character, the type still portrayed now and then in the Yiddish theater.

Herman walked up the steps without a word. He unlocked the door to his dark apartment and went into the bedroom. Yadwiga was still awake. She said, "Marianna has flown away."

Something gave way in Herman's insides.

"How?"

"I opened the window a little and she flew out."

"I warned you ..."

"It's an omen—I'll die in childbirth," Yadwiga said.

“A peasant to the end.”

“Then you’ll be able to marry your mistress.”

Herman knew very well that a parakeet couldn’t live long in the wild. Marianna would be killed by the first cold night, or she’d die of hunger, or she’d be murdered by other birds. He went into the kitchen. A light from outside lit up the birdcage. Woytus was standing alone on the perch where he usually slept with Marianna. When he heard Herman’s footsteps, he let out a chirp. Maybe Woytus would die of loneliness, Herman thought. He’d

heard of cases when one parakeet gets lost and its mate stops eating, as though it’s declared a hunger strike against the Creator. Such creatures also suffer from love.

Herman got undressed and got into bed. These days, sleeping with Yadviga felt like a burden, as though he were a murderer sentenced to lie in the coffin along with his victim. He was afraid to touch her belly, which was swelling and ripening from day to day. In this world of chaos, some power had transformed a seed-thread into an embryo with who knows how many organs, a million

nerves, countless inherited traits—all shaped by generations of abusers and generations of victims.

Herman lay on the edge of the bed. In his imagination, he saw Marianna sitting somewhere on a rooftop, without Woytus, without food, without water, sentenced to death, full of sorrow as old as life itself. ■

Translated from the Yiddish by Rachel Mines.

This article was originally published on July 19, 2023.

ARTS & LETTERS

I, Sea Jew

Jews and water don’t mix

BY HOWARD JACOBSON

... now the Lord had prepared a great fish....

—Jonah and the Whale

I was warned as a boy that if I took a wife from among the gentiles, she would one day round on me and say Hitler was right. I married a gentile woman for all that, and the only person who ever mentioned Hitler in our 20-odd years of marriage was me. She didn’t mind. Someone must have told her that Jews had Hitler on the brain. She was less understanding, however, when I suddenly began invoking Yahweh. Because I was writing a biblical novel about Cain and Abel and was planning a Jewish travel book to be called *Roots Schmoots*, I had taken to reading the Talmud, though no Talmudist invoked Yahweh as often as I did. I was television critic for the short-lived *Correspondent* newspaper at the time, and Yahweh had begun to sneak into that. *Hill Street Blues* and

Yahweh. *Dynasty* and the absence of Yahweh. It wasn’t only Ros who grew concerned. The editor wondered if I needed time off.

One Friday—*Friday*, notice—Ros asked if we could have a Yahweh moratorium that weekend, take a Sunday drive where Yahweh would not show himself and where no Jews would either.

Ah—*Jews!* Well, I couldn’t say I hadn’t been warned.

“So just to be clear,” I said, “it’s not just Yahweh you want a break from.”

She shook her head. “It’s the whole caboodle.”

Poor Ros. She was Australian. A sailor, a swimmer, a water baby, and a gentile. I had always struck her as land-locked, airless, and marginally obsessive, but this latest Jew talk was beginning to strike her as the ravings of a madman. Possibly, I had it in me to be a prophet. But she didn’t have it in her to be a prophet’s wife.

So the next Sunday we got up early to drive to Lyme Regis, a town on England’s

Dorset coast that we both liked, rich in Jane Austen associations, rich in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* associations as well—but not, that I knew of, rich in Jew associations. “You won’t hear another word on the subject of Jews from me,” I promised as I opened the car door for her.

“Shh,” she said, putting her fingers to my lips. “That’s already too much.”

We wound the window down and enjoyed the country air. I started to sing “Onward, Christian Soldiers” as a joke. Ros didn’t find it funny. We had moved to London recently after a period in Cornwall, so the sight of the sea was doubly welcome. I took a detour via Swanage and swung onto a minor road so we could be closer still to the water. The salt spray stung our faces. A seagull screamed. I breathed in deeply. Ros wasn’t the only one who needed a mental clear-out. Suddenly she let out a little cry.

“What are those?”

“What are those what?”

“Those dark shapes on the beach.”

I slowed down. “They look like people to me,” I said.

“Why,” Ros asked, in great consternation, “would people be wearing black overcoats and homburgs to lie on a beach?”

I sped up, apologized, and told her to look away. I had promised her a Jew-free coastline, and here, if I was not mistaken, was a beach of Lubavitchers.

“On the beach?”

“Well, there is no religious reason that I know of why not.”

“But is there any reason *why*?”

“That’s a rather Australian question,” I said. “You don’t have to want to surf or play volleyball to visit a beach. Why can’t they just be seeking sun?”

“In those clothes? I reckon they’ve come here straight from synagogue.”

“Unlikely, on a Sunday.”

“Could it be some Jewish festival, then?”

I was the wrong one to ask. “Not that I’m aware of,” I said, “and I don’t know of any that stipulate a beach. We do cast our sins onto a lake or into the sea on Rosh Hashanah—I often did it in Cornwall when you weren’t looking—but it’s not that time of the year.”

We drove to Lyme Regis in silence. Walked the Cobb. Remembered Louisa Musgrove jumping off. And Meryl Streep in her hood. But all I could really think about were the Hasidim on the beach, maybe waiting for Moshiach. For all I knew, waiting for the perfect wave.

Before sleep, I decided it had been a mirage. Ros too. I was having visions for both of us.

I don’t know whether I’m the only Jew who, when looking out to sea, imagines a great fish—the one Yahweh “prepared” for Jonah—suddenly appearing on the beach, opening its mouth, regurgitating the prophet, and disappearing again under the waves. Since everything Jews do is not how others do it, turning up on a beach via the sea instead of going into the sea via a beach has an exquisite appropriateness.

Well, maybe not if you’re Mark Spitz. But it tells you something that Spitz remains the only go-to Jewish swimmer, the only one most Jews can name, 50 years after winning his seven Olympic medals. Jewish recalcitrance in the matter of sport is a tired old joke, no matter how many tired old Jews love telling it. In truth, we do all right on the field and the track and even the cricket pitch, considering our numbers and the time we must otherwise put into being a light unto nations. But the sea remains problematic.

The children of Israel do not appear to have been seafarers. Fishermen and

“We met kashrut halfway: no bacon in the fridge, but as much of it as we could consume when we hit Blackpool.”

farmers, yes; sailors, no. We cared for sheep and wandered 40 years in the desert. The habit of taking to water never formed in us. Possibly the Jewish imagination was seized too powerfully by the idea of Leviathan, breathing fire under the sea, or other fish big enough to accommodate a whole man in its belly, for Jews ever to wander far from the Judean hills.

And then there’s Noah. The myth of the flood is not unique to the Hebrews. Dread of winter is surely enough to account for its ubiquity among other ancient people. But Noah did more than keep us going until the return of fair weather. Noah came between us and God, who was bent on undoing His own work and returning us to the original chaos before He separated the waters from the land. How often did He threaten us with water as punishment for our iniquities? *Après moi le déluge*.

More recently, the sinking of the Titanic, with Jews aboard, didn’t do much to reconcile us to seagoing. Joseph Hyman, who survived the sinking, gave thanks by opening a delicatessen in Manchester in 1913—*Titanic’s*—and no matter how good the chopped herring, going there always left me slightly queasy. You approached the counter and saw the ship going down in that cold, dark sea. I drew pictures of it as a child—the

ocean the consistency of chicken soup, the life buoys bagels, the chimney stacks gherkins, the iceberg a giant kneidlach. That may or may not explain why I have never learned to swim.

For all that—or maybe because of that—once we could afford a family holiday, we chose proximity to the coast as Jews had been doing since Queen Victoria was alive. Gentile friends surprised me with stories of accompanying their parents to Snowdonia or the Peak District. For us, a holiday meant going to the sea, even if the nearest we got *to* it—because we certainly weren’t going *in* it—was a distant view through the rain from our hotel or boarding house window. I should be able to remember which, but I can’t.

Much as New York Jews fled the city heat by trooping off to the Catskills, so Northern Jews escaped the soot and smog of Manchester and Liverpool by driving the 50 miles or so to Southport, Blackpool, or Blackpool’s ever-so-slightly uppity neighbor, Lytham-St-Anne’s. Not to swim or surf but to breathe the air, order lemon sole, complain about the lemon sole, take in a show, and sit on the rocks.

What I remember most vividly about our holidays in Blackpool or Southport was how far out to sea the beaches stretched, how long it took before you could find a fringe of icy water for anyone under 50 to paddle in. Here was where piers came in handy. Without ever getting your feet wet, you could walk into the wind and imagine yourself to be at sea. Blackpool had, and still has, three piers. The northernmost, as I recall, had fewer slot machines and fortune tellers and more deck chairs for elderly Jews to snooze in and dream about the fish God would be preparing them that night.

As for that food, I am not a good witness as to how kosher it was. My family didn’t care about any of that once we were out of the house. We met kashrut halfway: no bacon in the fridge, but as much of it as we could consume when we hit Blackpool. A favorite ’50s Blackpool restaurant and meeting place for even moderately frum Mancunian Jews was The Lobster Pot. Perhaps the

frummet gave the lobsters themselves a miss, but once you've got marine crustaceans running around a kitchen, the cuisine can't be anything but *uber treife*.

I like to think the sea air relaxed the rules, though as early as the 1880s Blackpool had showed itself willing to be strict where strictness was desired. A notice in the *Jewish Chronicle* for June 1882 advertised "Apartments fronting the sea. Special arrangements for Jewish families. A Jewish cook kept." And a Mr. David Morris wanted it to be known that a strictly orthodox table-de-hote (sic) was available for board or apartments daily from 2 p.m. onward. By my time, however, the keeping of a Jewish cook was less of a draw.

What Blackpool and Southport were for Northern Jews, Bournemouth was for Londoners. *Jews by the Seaside* by Pam Fox, the historian of Anglo-Jewry, is a wonderfully compendious, not to say enthralling, account of the evolution of Bournemouth as a town where Jews would go to perambulate, convalesce, recover—in the words of one visitor, "from the effects of vexation" (the town's pine trees were said to be especially healthful)—eat kosher food, play cards (Kalooki by preference), and find a Jewish soulmate. In this you could say it resembled the Catskills, though

when it came to matchmaking, I doubt that anyone in Bournemouth would ever have equalled the success of the Concord's famed *maitre-de-shidduch*, Irving Cohen, who claimed thousands of successful marriages as a consequence of his table planning and who found me three highly suitable wives in the course of a weekend I spent at the Concord, regardless of my being already married.

But if Bournemouth didn't have a shadchan-in-chief, it had the cachet of being fashionably "southern," an elegant place to meet everyone you already knew, dance, talk loudly, and paddle in a sea warmer than Blackpool's. Here, by all accounts, liberal Jews frolicked with sufficient inhibition to embarrass their more conservative brethren. Pam Fox notes the incongruity of the latter's presence on the beach, dressed traditionally, willing to remove only their shoes—and even then only choosing times when few sunbathers were about. Eventually, as better-off, more secular Jews went in search of warmer weather and a more varied diet in Spain and Italy, or bought second homes in Israel, it grew harder to find a minyan for Kalooki. One by one, the grand hotels closed, and Bournemouth became a home-from-home for Charedim.

Which explained what Ros and I had seen on the drive into Lyme Regis.

After asking around the next day, we discovered that the Charedim on the beach had not been a Yahweh-driven hallucination. There was a Chabad Lubavitch Learning Centre nearby and Chabad hotels not far away in Bournemouth. Those we had seen were up early for modesty's sake, taking the morning air as and when they wanted to take it but, like everybody else, enjoying the sound of the waves, the feel of water on their faces, and the sand between their toes—assuming they'd remembered to remove their shoes.

Did we have a problem with that?

None. Absolutely none.

People who like a story to have an ending might wonder whether my failure to provide Ros with a single Jew-free weekend was the reason our marriage failed and whether she went on to find a companion to whom Yahweh mattered less. I cannot answer either of those questions, but the last I heard of her, she was back in Australia, living by the sea in Edenic, pagan Perth, and messing about in boats. ■

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COMMUNITY

First Resorts

The history of the Jewish Catskills before the Borscht Belt was born

BY JENNA WEISSMAN JOSELIT

Long before there was a Concord or a Grossinger's, there was the Fairmont and the Grand View Hotel. "Never heard of 'em," you say? That's because these establishments came into being and then folded their tents before

the Catskills became known as the Borscht Belt.

As the self-proclaimed "Leading Jewish Summer Resort of America" and the "First Hebrew Hotel in the Catskills" respectively, the Fairmont and the Grand View belonged to the first generation of vacation venues that catered to a New York Jewish clientele in the years prior

to and immediately following WWI. (At the time, its pleasure map also embraced Long Branch and Elberon on the Jersey Shore and Arverne and Far Rockaway in Queens, but that's another story.)

Their successors are much better known—their names ring a bell—but these sites also deserve their moment in the sun. Far more humble, with fewer amenities—a broad, sunlit porch was apt to be the big draw, not a smoky nightclub—they set in motion a series of expectations that would come to define the Catskills experience over time: the pursuit of pleasure, the celebration of abundance and bounty, the cultivation of appetite rather than the maintenance of restraint. These vacation spots made it possible for American Jews to embrace leisure as an end in itself.

No longer did they have to camouflage a summer vacation as a way station to, say, better health. Instead, summering became the thing to do. So much so that the *Hebrew Standard*, “America’s leading Jewish family newspaper,” came up with a weekly column of comings and goings in the Catskills and elsewhere, which it dubbed “Summerings.” Not to be outdone, the *American Hebrew*, in turn, countered with a column all its own, giving it the more high-toned title of “Social Items.” Readers of one or the other—or both—would learn who went where in the Catskills and for how long.

Advertisements touting the merits of one establishment after another filled the pages of these two newspapers, fueling the public’s interest, as did promotional booklets “available upon request” and, later still, tantalizingly colored postcards, eye-catching billboards, and photo albums. Competing with one another for the Jews’ custom, some hotels boasted about their “first class” accommodations, others of their spring-fed water, the “milk from our own cows,” their “unequaled” views, or their private bathrooms and “electric bell system in every room.”

Virtually every summer redoubt declared that the food served several times a day was strictly kosher; as a grace note, many also sang the praises of their Hungarian cuisine. That reference may stump contemporary historians like me, but it meant something back in the day: code for “you’ll not want for something good to eat.” An umbrella term that covered a lot of bases, Hungarian cuisine spoke of quality to some and of quantity to others. It also reassured prospective vacationers that they’d find nothing too exotic on the menu: just the familiar, comforting fare of fruit soup and pot cheese with noodles on the *milchik* side of the ledger; goulash and veal stew on the *fleischik* side; and everything well-spiced with caraway, or dill, or poppy seeds.

At first, most Catskills establishments more closely resembled a private home than a public hotel, which, in fact, was how many got their start: as boarding houses that rented out individual rooms for a week or two at relatively low cost to one family at a time. Known

“An umbrella term that covered a lot of bases, Hungarian cuisine spoke of quality to some and of quantity to others.”

in Yiddish as a *kuch-aleyn*, thanks (or no thanks) to the practice of each family cooking for itself in a communal kitchen, they left a lot to be desired. Mama and papa and *kinder* would be crammed into one room, which was barely tolerable when the weather was decent and downright intolerable when it was not. Indoor bathrooms didn’t exist, only outdoor privies, and outbursts of “Who drank my milk?!” were a daily occurrence.

Mindful of their property’s limitations, as well as the aspirations of their clientele, proprietors sought to make “improvements” just as soon as they could, all too aware that patrons would kiss the *kuch-aleyn* goodbye once their wallets expanded. Enter: the hotel. More and more rooms were added to the house until it took on wings; a common kitchen gave way to a dining room that accommodated hundreds of guests at one sitting, every one of them hungrily eyeing the daily mimeographed menu. The roster of available amenities similarly grew by leaps and bounds to encompass golf courses, concrete-and-steel swimming pools, tennis courts, billiard rooms, even ballrooms and, later still, casino-cum-nightclubs.

With no shortage of things to do all day long and into the wee hours, adult vacationers replicated familiar patterns

of urban sociability—charitable benefits were thick on the ground, as were opportunities for nursing a cup of tea or coffee—while introducing new ones, such as golf tournaments. Children were kept busy, too, engaging in outdoor sports as well as in masquerades, like the one in 1914 in which Eleanor Markowitz took home first prize for her costume as an ice cream cone, while her brother Victor came in second for dressing as a Hungarian peasant girl.

Perhaps the only aspect of the urban Jewish experience that didn’t carry over to, much less prosper in, the Catskills was synagogue life. Communal gatherings were aplenty, but davening together? No, thanks.

It wasn’t as if there were no synagogues in the area. In the early 1900s, a number of people who owned or rented “cottages” in Tannersville, New York, for instance, established a “pretty little synagogue, spacious enough for its needs, harmonious in its decorations and with large windows nobly open to the ever-changing beauty and glory of the mountains.”

For all its charms, the synagogue barely drew a minyan on Shabbos. Some of the locals begged off, claiming that the building was “inconveniently far away.” Others complained that its services went on for too long, sometimes “excruciatingly” so, keeping them away—or squirming in their seats. Hotel guests, for their part, had no reason to leave the premises; they could just as easily avail themselves of an on-site prayer service.

“Excuses, excuses,” responded the summer synagogue’s stalwarts, noting that those who complained that it was too much of a trek down a country road thought nothing of climbing the side of a mountain later in the day. As for the hotel minyan? Housed in a makeshift, improvised space that only hours before had been used for “hops and card games and ragtime playing,” it was no sanctuary. Besides, services were so “hastily and perfunctorily” performed, they barely qualified as an exchange with the Almighty.

“Stand by your summer shul,” Catskill vacationers were entreated—to no avail. They had something else in mind, their

attitude toward prayer of a piece with the ways in which Catskill hotel culture accommodated traditional ritual practice. Yes, most area hotels that catered to Jewish guests made sure that *kashrut* was observed. But since its imprint was invisible, subtle rather than overt, it didn't ask much of them. Public displays of religiosity, on the other hand, were something else. Calling too much attention to themselves, they interfered with leisure's gentle rhythms and, consequently, were often sidelined.

When, in the summer of 1917, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, then well on his way to becoming a household name for his bold, energizing ideas about modern Jewish identity, stayed at a hotel in

Tannersville—probably the Fairmont—for the weekend, he was dismayed, even affronted, by the prevailing Friday night atmosphere. There wasn't one: no tangible signs such as flickering Shabbos candles, no sounds of guests making *kiddush*.

The absence of Sabbath spirit in an avowedly Jewish hotel in the Catskills so troubled Kaplan that he recorded the incident in his diary, calling it a “godless spectacle.” But the *mise-en-scène* didn't trouble his fellow guests, not in the least. What they experienced was entirely to their liking: a Shabbos after their own hearts, with good food, a convivial atmosphere, spirited conversation within the company of their own—and

then, on to the dance floor to shimmy the night away or to the parlor to play several hands of pinochle.

A Catskills vacation may not have lasted long, but its effects lingered well after the bathing suits and tennis rackets had been packed away. Like the latest dance crazes, it shook things up, giving rise to and licensing a new, self-consciously modern and compelling form of identity, one in which Jewishness pivoted more on affinity than on faith. Mount Sinai had furnished the Jews with one form of expression; the Catskill Mountains gave them another. ■

This article was originally published on July 20, 2023.

FOOD

Why Are So Many Kosher Restaurants So Bad?

The laws of *kashrut* indirectly affect non-food-related aspects of the kosher culinary industry

BY ANNA RAHMANAN

For observant Jews, dining at a kosher restaurant is usually a comforting experience. The outing is typically free of the sorts of cautions that eating at a non-kosher establishment calls for when trying to follow the laws of *kashrut*: no need to scan the menu for traces of shellfish or meat, for example. And waiters also don't need to be told about potential “allergies” (Jewish camouflage for “I can't eat that on religious grounds”).

And yet, a meal at a kosher eatery often brings its own frustrations that cause diners to consider never returning

to the premise again. Whether involving sub-par service, the food on offer, or exorbitant prices, the common experience leads to a single question: Why are so many kosher restaurants so bad?

To begin with, it would be helpful to understand what, exactly, makes a good eatery in general.

“I think customers go to restaurants for a variety of reasons,” said food and restaurant critic Andy Hayler. “Usually, it's a combination of things: the food, something about the service, and the ambience. At least two of those criteria—food and service—are crucial, as there are some eateries that are successful without providing a great ambience.”

Food-wise, kosher restaurants are obviously limited by the laws of *kashrut*. Interestingly enough, though, according to folks like Dani Klein, the founder of blog and Instagram account Yeah That's Kosher, abiding by the culinary guidelines might end up affecting the quality of service.

In fact, Jewish and non-Jewish critics and experts alike seem to agree that tight financial margins across the entire industry coupled with the higher cost of operating a kosher establishment are the main problems plaguing kosher restaurants.

“Kosher restaurants can't be open 365 days a year—the number is probably closer to 200-and-something because of Shabbat and all the holidays,” explained Klein. “Right off the bat, then, they are losing almost 30% of the year.”

It is only logical, then, that to be financially viable, kosher restaurants have to earn more than similar non-kosher establishments during the days that they are fully operational. That increased daily earnings goal, which also leads to higher prices for diners, may be more than the average kosher restaurant could realistically contend with.

“Operating a restaurant alone is nearly impossible because, even if every seat is taken, there is a gap in how much you can actually earn and how much you have to spend to operate nicely,” said

David Zaken, owner of kosher destination Paprika on Long Island. “With the money you make, you have to pay your workers, taxes, insurance, rent, and much more.”

Zaken clearly knows what he’s talking about: After managing an eponymous catering business in Manhattan for years, he and his wife, Roni, decided to move the operation less than an hour away to Great Neck, Long Island, where they now manage a brick-and-mortar space that’s wildly successful among kosher-keeping locals.

“In the culinary world, doing catering alone is hard, and operating a restaurant by itself is almost impossible, so you’re going to have to do both things together to survive,” he said, also talking about Paprika’s own business model. “Doing so as a kosher business makes your life even harder because you have to buy your meat and vegetables from kosher-certified companies, which are basically little mobs, as they can raise their prices however much they want, and you’re still obligated to purchase from them.” Non-kosher restaurants, he explains, can shop around more and therefore lower their overall costs.

In addition to buying kosher ingredients, restaurateurs like Zaken also have to pay for kosher-certification and a mashgiach (basically, a supervisor who will make sure all kitchen-related activities abide by kashrut laws). According to a 2016 *Crain’s* article, having two full-time mashgiachs on staff can cost upwards of \$100,000 a year. To account for these additional expenditures, a lot of kosher eateries end up cutting corners in other aspects of the business, such as service, and, of course, raising the price of their dishes.

“The restaurants that don’t do catering just lower their costs in different ways to have something to take home at the end of the day,” said Zaken.

Add to it all the fact that finding waiters, chefs, and busboys willing not to work on Fridays and Saturdays—historically, the busiest and most tip-heavy days for a restaurant—automatically lessens the quality of the staff, and you’ve got yourself a pretty dire situation.

“Good workers are the hardest thing to find,” said Elan Kornblum, editor

“A vast majority of Jewish-adjacent eateries serve Japanese sushi alongside Mexican tacos, Italian pizza, and Chinese hot-and-sour soup out of the same kitchen.”

and publisher of *Great Kosher Restaurants Magazine*. “A lot of times, if the restaurant really wants to put out a great product, they are at the mercy of their staff. If you’re a waiter, though, you don’t want to not work Friday and Saturday but would rather be employed somewhere you can work every day—especially on a busy weekend. So, to find a non-Jewish waiter to work at a kosher restaurant is tough.”

The value of service is paramount across the industry as a whole, no matter customers’ diet-related preferences.

“The reason why we go to a restaurant is to feel valued,” said Hayler. “If you turn up at the door and nobody is there to greet you, that’s annoying. If, when you sit down, you have to wait long to be tended to, that’s annoying. If the staff is distracted or overstretched, it’s irritating. Achieving a service where none of these things happen is not trivial to do.”

Back to the actual food, Hayler also mentions a sort of gastronomic uniformity as a marker of success.

“If you look at some restaurant menus and they offer a combination of Indian, Chinese, and Thai, for example, then it’s not a coherent concept,” Hayler said about eateries in general. Although he strictly writes about *treyf* (non-kosher) businesses, his outlook touches upon

another issue within the kosher world: menus that are eight pages long and include dishes that span a variety of food genres that don’t necessarily go together.

Although some more high-end eateries in, for example, Manhattan and Los Angeles, do dedicate themselves to single cuisines—French steakhouse Le Marais in New York is a prime example—a vast majority of Jewish-adjacent eateries serve Japanese sushi alongside Mexican tacos, Italian pizza, and Chinese hot-and-sour soup out of the same kitchen. The only two cuisines you likely won’t see side by side are French and Italian—the former heavy on the meat and the latter an ode to all things dairy, a duo automatically disqualified on kashrut grounds that prohibit consuming meat and dairy together.

But not all experts agree that culinary singularity should be prized above variety.

“Menus should be varied, and to be successful, they should appeal to a broad audience,” said Kornblum. “At the end of the day, a restaurant is a business, so it needs to have enough volume and customers to be successful.”

Despite the challenges of eating at kosher eateries, we return. Even in cities like New York, where kosher restaurants are abundant in number, strictly kosher customers are relatively forgiving: No matter how bad the food or the experience as a whole, the majority of consumers tend to go back to an eatery because, after all, there are only so many kosher ones around.

That, perhaps, might be one of the biggest problems within the industry: If diners don’t hold the various kitchens and staff members accountable, why should the businesses ever strive to do better? ■

This article was originally published on July 19, 2023.

 **HOLIDAYS**

Point your smart phone camera at the QR code to learn more about Jewish holidays.



THE REST

→ A U.S. Army soldier touring the Joint Security Area between North and South Korea **apparently crossed over the border into North Korea, where military officials say he is now being detained by North Korea's People's Army.** According to CBS news, the soldier was on his way back to the United States because of a disciplinary infraction, but once he'd gone through airport security, he **snuck away from his escort and onto the border tour before making a run for the border.** The Biden administration will now likely have to intervene to retrieve the soldier.

→ Joining the United States, **Israel has recognized Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, a continuation of the diplomatic relationship that was reestablished recently as part of the Abraham Accords** brokered by former president Donald Trump. "Morocco has always considered regaining sovereignty over Western Sahara as its highest national security priority after regaining its independence from France in 1956 and later from Spanish control," Zineb Riboua, research associate and program manager of Hudson Institute's Center for Peace and Security in the Middle East, told The Scroll. "The recognition will open doors to more Israeli investments in Morocco's southern provinces, which are rich in resources and potential, and more importantly, to more military cooperation given the proliferation of terrorist activities and Iranian proxies in the Sahel, which threaten Morocco and Israel."

→ During the first half of 2023, the number of **travelers departing from the United States to Israel surpassed pre-pandemic figures, a signal of Israel's flourishing tourism.** According to the country's tourism ministry, June saw a 27% bump compared to last year, with a flow of visitors coming not just from the United States but from France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom as well. Though the holy sites continue to be a draw, social media influencers are leading travelers to trips along the Negev desert and scuba dives to underwater archaeological excavation sites.

→ **Number of the Day: \$42 million.** That's how much owners of the **downtown Baltimore office tower One South Street lost selling their building** for \$24 million in June after it previously sold for more than \$66 million eight years prior. The incredible loss on the 30-story office building is the first tower sold since the end of the pandemic and a **warning sign to other commercial real estate investors** sitting on buildings with sagging occupancy rates. "If there's not something terribly unique about this building, I would really worry that this is a terrible leading indicator that there's been a massive reduction in the demand for downtown space," economist Stephen Walters told The Baltimore Sun.

→ After dramatic, prime-time promises to hold railroad operators to account for the toxic chemical spill in East Palestine, Ohio, in February, **GOP lawmakers cozy with railroad lobbyists are stalling the regulation that's seen the rare endorsement of both President Joe Biden and former president Donald Trump.** Spearheaded by Ohio Sens. J.D. Vance (R) and Sherrod Brown (D), the bipartisan rail safety bill seeks to enhance inspection and monitoring procedures seen as essential to preventing another massive toxic chemical disaster. But the added safety measures are seen as a costly burden by rail operators, particularly the Railroad Commission of Texas—which has lobbied Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, the chair of the commerce committee where the bill could soon die—because it would add transportation expenses to oil companies.

THE BIG STORY

President Biden extended a long-awaited invitation to host Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the White House on Monday evening, a diplomatic missive that comes amidst simmering tensions on Capitol Hill after one leading Democratic lawmaker called Israel "a racist state" over the weekend. The comment from Congressional Progressive Caucus Chair Pramila Jayapal came during a conference in Chicago, when she told protestors who interrupted a panel discussion, "I want you to know that we have been fighting to make it clear that Israel is a racist state," a remark that immediately drew condemnation from the Jewish community as well as top lawmakers from both parties. On Tuesday, the House will vote on a resolution denouncing antisemitism, and 43 House Democrats, including several Progressive Caucus members, endorsed a letter expressing their "deep concern" over Rep. Jayapal's statement. "We will never allow anti-Zionist voices that embolden antisemitism to hijack the Democratic Party and country," they write in a draft of the letter, reported in Axios.

Walking back her remark, Jayapal said afterward that she doesn't "believe the idea of Israel as a nation is racist" but that the "extreme right-wing government" under Netanyahu has "engaged in discriminatory and outright racist policies."

—Sean Cooper

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The Austerity Diet

Looking back on how Israelis dealt with food rationing in the first years after independence—and who bore the burden of feeding their families

BY DANA KESSLER

Israel's national founder and first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, is remembered for many things: for his famous Declaration of Independence speech, for leading the country during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, and for standing on his head, among other things. He is also remembered for a distinct time in the country's history: the period of austerity, which was introduced as a means of dealing with the mass immigration to the young country. Officially it lasted from 1949 to 1959, but in reality, it ended much sooner.

The brand-new state opened the immigration gates that were blocked during the British Mandate, and masses of Jewish immigrants started arriving: Holocaust survivors and European refugees as well as Jews from Arab countries. Many of these immigrants came penniless, and the country needed to sustain them and support them. Financial need, backed by a socialist and anti-materialistic worldview, brought in Israel's austerity regime.

In terms of food, austerity meant modest rations of food per person, according to very specific allowances, that differed from adults to children and babies and pregnant women. To ensure that every person received the allowance they were entitled to, coupons were used, and this was strictly supervised by the government. Most restrictions were lifted by 1953, when Israel started to receive compensation from West Germany for confiscation of Jewish property during the Holocaust. In the following years, the list of rationed goods became increasingly smaller, until it was entirely abolished. (Some food products were still not available in Israel until the late

1980s because of the Arab League boycott, but that's a different story.)

During austerity, cooking was done on wicks or Primus stoves, and kitchenware was made out of tin or enamel. In the beginning, there were no electric refrigerators—only the kind you put ice blocks into. To save space in the icebox, cooler cabinets with mesh walls were used to store sensitive items like eggs and bread.

The difficult task of keeping a family fed, healthy, and happy under this regime was the daily struggle of the Israeli housewife. She had to stand in line at the grocery store, sometimes for hours. She had to struggle to obtain quality goods. And she had to improvise in the kitchen to be able to feed her family with the insufficient products she had. There was no variety, most products were scarce or nonexistent, and the quality of food was usually poor. To make due, substitutes were used. Women used egg powder instead of eggs and diluted margarine instead of butter. The idea was to create the dishes that the family had been accustomed to before, and naturally craved, using whatever was available. The substitutes were supposed to taste similar to the original products and provide the same nutrients.

Ashkenazi Jews, for instance, craved chopped liver, and thus an eggplant salad that looks and feels like chopped liver (even if it doesn't really taste like it) was invented. There aren't many austerity recipes that are still prevalent today, but this one is. There is even a commercial version of this mock chopped liver that can, to this day, be bought at the supermarket; it's much cheaper than real chopped liver, has less cholesterol, and is a great solution for vegetarians.

Jews from Arab countries, on the

other hand, craved rice, but instead they got a type of toasted pasta called *ptitim*, similar to Italian orzo or Sardinian fregola. *Ptitim* are, in fact, made of crumbled dough that is baked (at the factory) before it is boiled (at home). According to Wikipedia, "*Ptitim* was created in 1953, during the austerity period in Israel. David Ben-Gurion asked Eugen Proper, one of the founders of the Osem food company, to devise a wheat-based substitute for rice. The company took up the challenge and developed *ptitim*, which is made of hard wheat flour and toasted in an oven. *Ptitim* was initially produced with a rice-shape, but after its success, Osem also began to produce a ball-shaped variety inspired by couscous."

This is why the product was colloquially known as "Ben-Gurion rice" and later as "Israeli couscous" in English-speaking countries. Even though they were born out of need, *ptitim* became a sort of comfort food that Israelis associate with their childhood, and a nostalgic staple of old-time Israeli cuisine.

Making something from nothing was the motto, and cookbooks and newspaper columns employed experts to help the young housewife feed her family with the meager allowance at hand. There were also free courses organized by volunteer organizations such as the Women's International Zionist Organization.

Lilian Cornfeld, who was born in Montreal in 1902 and made aliyah in 1922,

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was the burgeoning nation's Martha Stewart. As a nutritionist and nutrition instructor, she became a pioneer in cookbook writing, publishing cookbooks in Israel from the early 1940s—before the State of Israel was established—to the late 1960s.

In 1949, Cornfeld published *Ma avashel me-manot tsena?* (“What Shall I Cook from Austerity Rations?”)—which was kindly lent to me by Oded Zwickel, owner of Ha-Tsrif, a privately owned mini-museum dedicated to vintage Israeli kitchens and their contents. Thus, I had the pleasure of browsing through this and various other cookbooks of the time, all of which have since become precious collectors’ items.

The book has a foreword by the first Israeli government’s minister of rationing and supply, Dov Yosef—the man who was in charge of determining the citizens’ necessities in order to ration their quantity and ensure their supply. In his prologue, he attempted to explain the rationale behind the rationing and to put the reader’s faith in Cornfeld, ensuring her that this manual will enable her to feed her family.

Cornfeld also addressed her readers personally: “For the housewife in Israel: The recipes in this book are based on the same food ingredients. The austerity regime requires a new approach by the Israeli housewife to planning the menus and cooking them ... The state’s slogan is to ensure a maximum of food for a minimum of expenses and to provide everyone with equal and appropriate portions as much as possible. In fact, every housewife is an important factor in our economy. Her strength and talent in managing the house were mobilized to revive our economy.”

In 1953, a new edition was published under the name *What Shall I Cook?*—still in full-on austerity mode: “As long as butter or cream have not become everyday commodities, we will use margarine instead of butter, *leben* (a dairy product made of fermented milk) and milk skin instead of cream. We will make fake whipped cream and we will skillfully use milk powder and egg powder if they are available.” Naturally, the book opens with a long list of substitutes, such as using milk powder mixed

“The austerity regime perpetuated and deepened inequality between men and women.”

with gelatin instead of whipped cream; yeast dough dumplings instead of potatoes; a mixture of *leben* and oil instead of mayonnaise; and many more. It is explained that two flat tablespoons of egg powder mixed with 2.5 spoons of warm water equals one egg.

Powders were all the rage, and the government’s PR machine tried to convince the public that they were not just as good as the real thing, but better. Dr. Erela Taharlev Ben Shachar—a historian of science who focuses on nutrition and the author of forthcoming book *From Counting Values to Counting Calories: The History of Nutrition in Israel*—researched this point extensively.

“The government’s propaganda for powders among women emphasized very much the ‘modern’ aspects of them,” she told me. “The fact that they are compact, that you don’t need to frequently go to the grocery store, that they demonstrate rational thinking. The message was that anyone who adopts scientific thinking should understand that there is no difference between an egg and egg powder. Those who refused to see the powder as the ‘real thing’ were called ‘primitive.’”

I asked Ben Shachar if austerity caused any health problems or deficiencies. “At the beginning of the austerity period there was a discussion about

calcium and riboflavin deficiency,” she replied. “Later it was widely believed that the powders solved this problem. Later on, in 1951, there was concern that the children were not getting enough calories. It was probably not justified, but at the time some experts demanded an increase of sugar in the children’s allowance in order to increase the number of calories they receive.”

Ben Shachar believes the austerity regime perpetuated and deepened inequality between men and women. “Men were behind the rationing, and the belief was that as long as the menu contained a sufficient amount of proteins, carbohydrates, and calories, it is satisfactory, even if it condemned the women to hard work, as well as a great emotional investment. Such bland and monotonous food could not be distributed to the population if the women weren’t willing to spend extra hours turning these inedible ingredients into palatable or at least edible food.

“Although austerity was seen as an eating regime that embodies egalitarian ideas and socialist concepts, in practice, there were populations that received more and populations that carried more of the burden,” she told me. “According to my research, as well as that of historian Orit Rozin, austerity discriminated against women. The way in which women were discriminated against was not reflected in the amount of food they received but in the amount of work that was required of them and in the ‘transparency’ of their work, which was not taken into account as a type of resource. And there was also a more direct aspect. According to Rozin, women often saved food from their mouths and gave their portions of protein or sugar to the children. This is a phenomenon that was known all over the world. After all, austerity was not an Israeli invention—the Israelis ‘copied’ it from Britain, and the U.S. also had its own food regime during WWII.”

Women weren’t required to merely be great cooks and housewives; they were expected to be magicians, as is evident by this magic trick Cornfeld mentioned: how to make two chickens from one. “Some know how to serve two chickens from one chicken,” she wrote. “They

strip the skin with the wings and part of the legs, fill it with desired stuffing, and here is a second chicken. It is not easy to learn to remove the skin in its entirety, but it will not be difficult to remove the skin from the neck as well as from the legs. Fill this skin with flour seasoned with salt, pepper, onion, and parsley, or with bread stuffing. Sew and roast together with the chicken, or cook in soup.”

One wonders if Israelis celebrate their Independence Day with barbecues and copious amounts of meat as a way to remind themselves that at the beginning of this journey, meat was hard to come by.

The quality of products deteriorated rapidly. By the end of 1950, grocery stores attempted to sell products that were unfit for human consumption, and women started to protest against this. The press printed women’s complaints about shortages and the difficulty to obtain even the rationed goods.

One of the great spokespeople of the time was journalist Ora Shem-Or—mother of lyricist Mirit Shem-Or and mother-in-law of deceased Israeli pop star Svikia Pick (she sadly didn’t live long enough to witness her granddaughter, Daniella Pick, marry Quentin Tarantino).

Ben Shachar remembers Ora Shem-Or and her regular column in women’s magazine *La’Isha* fondly: “She was a great publicist and a woman with liberal views while everyone else was Mapai,” the democratic socialist political party, which was dominant at the time. “Her writing was critical and from the point of view of women. She wrote from experience, from familiarity with long hours of standing in line, with the need to provide a holiday dinner in the absence of materials, with the terrible anxiety for babies that might not be getting sufficient nutrition, and with the huge gap between the women who had to feed their families, and the men—the scientists and government officials who dictated what to eat and had no idea what this required of the person who really cooks. She gave a voice to the rage and frustration of women in the newspaper

and even motivated them to political and consumer activism.

“There was also a great satirical column in *La’Isha*, written by Yosef Vinitzki, although the identity of the writer was top secret at the time,” Ben Shachar continued. “It was written as a diary of a baby who documented what its parents were saying. In one column, the baby described how ‘they wrote in the newspaper that there was milk, so Mommy ran to the grocery store, and the shopkeeper said there was no more. Mom said, ‘But it was written in the newspaper,’ so the shopkeeper answered, ‘then boil the newspaper.’ Beyond the fact that this was a terribly funny column, it expressed the criticism of the government, the irony of the government’s control over food, and the anxiety of women to feed their babies.”

All of this, of course, brought on corruption and the emergence of an active black market. In the early years, idealism and hope helped the frustrated public through this hardship. For a while it was perceived as a collective effort. But after a few years, people were fed up, and buying on the black market became more common for whoever could afford it. “In one of columns of the satirical baby diary in *La’Isha*,” Ben Shachar recalled, the baby supposedly said, “If you boycott the black market, you should boycott me—because I am entirely a product of the black market.”

Buying food products illegally on the black market was especially prevalent in the city. People living in the country, on a kibbutz or a moshav, had it easier when it came to food since they could grow their own. But even this was not always the case. “A new study by historian Gadi Algazi shows that the Arab population was discriminated against,” Ben Shachar told me. “It was in the Arab villages that the inequality and lack was felt more than in the city. It is commonly thought that villagers suffered less than city dwellers because they had direct access to fruit and vegetables, but this was only true among the Jewish population. Since the rations in the city were given per person, it was difficult to discriminate against the Arabs there. But the method of division

in small settlements was ‘collective,’ so that each village and settlement received the food for all its inhabitants, and Arab villages received less than Jewish ones.

“Generally speaking, the most sought-after product on the black market was ‘undiluted food’ and food that wasn’t ‘fake.’ The quality of the food that reached consumers in the days of austerity was very poor. According to historian Orit Rozin, there was sand in instant coffee and sawdust in candy. There was a story about a shopkeeper who, when she received undiluted cheese (not mixed with milk powder), she refused to sell it to customers and kept it all for her family. So, popular items on the black market were undiluted milk, undiluted wine, and clean coffee.”

But not everyone remembers the period of austerity as a bad one. My mother, Livia Novi Kessler—a Holocaust survivor born in Transylvania—made aliyah with her parents in 1950. She was 12 years old at the time and, as a young girl, remembers this as an exciting time. “For the first year and a half we lived in a Ma’abara (an immigrant and refugee absorption camp) in Acre,” she told me. “We cooked on a Primus and bought supplies with food coupons and stood in line to get them, but I don’t ever remember being hungry. First of all, my family went through the Holocaust and then lived in Communist Romania, so the austerity in Israel was much better than any of those things. And even during austerity we had foods in Israel that we never had in Romania, like oranges, lemons, and even chocolate. I remember it was weird to me that we didn’t have apples, but the oranges more than made up for that. We were thankful for whatever we got because before that, we had much less. Plus, we were Zionists, and we felt that this food shortage was for a great cause. Instead of good food and luxury, we had idealism. Living the Zionist dream was much more important to us than food or any kind of material goods. We really didn’t mind the hardship.” ■

This article was originally published on July 18, 2023.

Alsatian Rhubarb Tart

BY JOAN NATHAN

INGREDIENTS

FOR THE FILLING

- 6 cups of ½-inch pieces of rhubarb (about 2 pounds), peeled if stringy**
- 1 ¼ cups sugar**
- 2 large eggs**
- ½ cup heavy cream**
- ¼ teaspoon vanilla extract**

FOR THE CRUST

- 6 tablespoons unsalted butter, Crisco, or coconut oil, or a combination of shortenings**
- 1 ¼ cups unbleached all-purpose flour**
- ¼ teaspoon salt**
- 2 tablespoons sugar**

PREPARATION

TO MAKE THE FILLING

Step 1

Put the rhubarb and ¾ cup of the sugar in a heavy medium saucepan set over medium heat. Cook, stirring occasionally, for about 10 minutes, or until the rhubarb softens and falls apart. This can be done a day ahead.

Step 2

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees, and roll out the dough. Carefully fit it into an ungreased 9-inch tart pan with a removable bottom, or make it freeform on a cookie sheet of approximately the same size. Prick it all over with a fork and bake for 15 minutes. Remove from the oven and cool slightly.

Step 3

In the meantime, beat the eggs in a small bowl. Whisk in the cream, the vanilla, and the remaining ½ cup sugar.

Step 4

Spread the rhubarb on the bottom of the tart. Pour the custard over the rhubarb, and bake for about 25 minutes, or until golden brown and set. Serve warm or at room temperature, garnished with strawberries if you like and whipped cream or ice cream.

TO MAKE THE CRUST

Step 1

Cut the butter or shortening into small pieces, and toss into a food processor fitted with a steel blade, along with the flour, salt, and sugar. Pulse until the texture is like very coarse meal. Gradually add 3 tablespoons ice water, pulsing until the dough comes together in a ball. Shape the dough into a disk, cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate for at least 45 minutes.

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