ary Lesin-Davis is an experienced English criminal lawyer whose cases typically revolve around complex fraud and international money laundering. But in recent years, he has picked up a new area of expertise: He has become known for using English law to prosecute recalcitrant Orthodox Jewish husbands who render their wives agunot—"chained women”—by refusing to grant them a get, a Jewish bill of divorce.

Historically, the term agunot referred to Jewish women whose husbands had disappeared during war or travel, leaving it unclear whether their missing husbands were alive or dead, and rendering the women “anchored” to their marriages, unable to move on and remarry while the fate of the husbands was unknown. In the modern era, the term generally refers to women who have become “chained” to marriages because their husband refuse to grant them a get.

There are many reasons why men withhold gets from their ex-wives. Often gets are used as leverage in custody and financial disputes, or are used as a controlling mechanism, where withholding the religious divorce prevents ex-wives from having the option to remarry in their community. Agunot are a global issue, with rabbis, lawyers, and advocates using a mix of creative halachic thinking and innovative legal approaches to try and solve this longstanding problem.

“The side of things you see in domestic abuse cases—domestic violence, domestic control, financial control, emotional and psychological pressure—in all these instances there is pressure put on the victim. Get abuse is a form of that,” said Lesin-Davis. “It is not just physical assault. There was always legislation to deal with that. But there was never any legislation to deal with the stuff that goes on in relationships that falls short of physical violence, and sometimes that’s longer lasting than a punch or bruise.”

In a widely reported case recently, Lesin-Davis successfully argued that withholding the get was a form of coercive control that should be prosecuted under England’s Serious Crimes Act, a piece of English criminal legislation that was not specifically drafted for agunot. Using such legislation was not without difficulty.

“One of the key elements of this law is that the parties have to be personally connected, in an intimate relationship or living together,” he said. “The difficulty with this legislation is when a couple have divorced civilly and haven’t lived or slept together in years. It can be difficult for non-Jews to understand Jewish
relationships, where even in such a case, in [Orthodox] Judaism, the wife would not be permitted to [be in a relationship] anyone else, even if she has had nothing to do with her husband for years.”

The fight to free *agunot* utilizing the secular court system rather than through the rabbinate is not without controversy. Some *dayanim*, or religious judges, are loath to advance the use of secular law on behalf of *agunot*, arguing that court-ordered punishments would invalidate any religious divorce given, as *gets* must be given freely and without pressure.

Rabbanit Ellyse Borghi, an Australian family lawyer who is also on the board of Unchain My Heart, an Australian *get*-advocacy organization that collaborates with other international *get* advocacy groups, empathizes with women who turn to solutions outside of a traditional Beth Din, or religious court.

“I think it is a really shameful that our religious courts and religious leaders are not able to resolve this issue themselves and have delegated this responsibility to the secular courts,” she said. “There is an enormous scope within Halacha to deal with these issues directly and I think we will get much better outcomes using halacha to address these issues rather than civil law.”

But with women often languishing, and creative and reliable halachic solutions not yet foolproof, scores of women are drawn to solutions, even outside of a Beth Din, that will allow them to be free.

“Batei Din in the diaspora do not have enforceability when it comes to sanctions in the same way Batei Din do in Israel,” said Joanne Greenaway, a lawyer and chief executive of the London School of Jewish Studies who previously worked on resolving *get* cases. “The secular courts are an additional tool that can be helpful to the Beth Din. It sends a really clear message that *get* refusal is abusive and is not OK. And that can help the Beth Din from preventing new cases from arising.”

Greenaway’s role has included helping resolve longstanding cases involving *agunot*, as well as advising other British family law lawyers working on resolving cases.

When asked how many *agunot* she estimates are currently in England, Greenaway was considered in her response: “It is so hard to quantify because there is no standard, uniform definition of *agunot* and there are always many cases open at varying stages and with a whole range of different complexities,” she said. “It is hard to put a quantity on someone’s pain when you just measure the numbers.”

While the English cases have set a precedent for how *get* cases may be prosecuted in the future by secular courts in the U.K., similar outcomes are less certain in other jurisdictions.

Michael A. Helfand, an expert on religious law and religious liberty as well as vice dean for faculty and research at Pepperdine University in California, understands the difficulties involved in bringing such a case in the United States. “In the context of religion, there are very strong First Amendment reasons why [replicating a similar case in the United States] would be difficult,” he said, while also noting, “It’s not to say those hurdles are insurmountable.”

A recent case in California seems to indicate that under certain circumstances there may, on occasion, be some appetite for American courts to deal with coercive control in the context of *agunot*. “The recent California decision is an example of using the husband’s refusal to grant a *get* as one piece of evidence—among others—supporting a finding of abuse,” said Helfand. “In that way, it deftly avoids the kind of decision that runs into First Amendment problems, focusing instead on the coercive control inquiry.”

In the U.S., the First Amendment provides that Congress make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting its free exercise. Legal experts generally understand this to mean that courts should not be trying to figure out what is or is not appropriate religious conduct.

“Sometimes courts say they should not get entangled in religious issues,” said Helfand. “The kind of case where you [could overcome the First Amendment] would be one where from the specific facts of the case, you could excise the religious behavior and separate it from the abusive behavior. If there is a way to separate abusive behavior, then religious exercise could be possible and surmount constitutional obstacles.”

Helfand pointed to the two *get* laws in New York State that aim to prevent *agunot* by directing judges to take several factors into account and effectively condition the procuring of a civil divorce upon the giving of a *get*. “These laws could potentially be replicated elsewhere around the country,” he said.

Keshet Starr, executive director of the Organization for the Resolution of Agunot in the United States thinks the prevention of *agunot* should occur through a multifaceted approach. “The way I think about it, instead of thinking of one bulletproof solution, the goal is to have a well-stocked toolbox with a lot of tools that help,” she said.

One of her go-to suggestions is the halachic prenuptial agreement. Created by the Beth Din of America, and promoted by ORA, the agreement is signed by couples before they marry and in the event of a divorce, requires the parties to appear before a Beth Din. According to the prenup, if the couple does not live together anymore, the husband is required to pay monetary support to his wife at a daily fixed rate as long as they remain married. This then empowers a Beth Din to have the requisite power to enforce the *get*.

“The prenup is a strong tool because it helps change the conversation,” Starr said. “It also creates social change that *gets* shouldn’t be used for leverage in divorces.”

Starr’s organization’s approach has been successful in helping many *agunot*. “ORA’s position is to create organic change within the system,” she said. “We are inside the circle to work with rabbinic leaders. Figuring out these tools are complicated. We ultimately want to offer *agunot* a range of options. Not every option is right for all people. We don’t believe pushing people down one path but giving them options and they can pick whatever feels right to them as they go through this process.”

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The Name of the Lebanese Play? The Aristocrats!

The country’s recent election was a masterpiece of counterfactual Kabuki theater—and there wasn’t a dry Western eye in the house

BY TONY BADRAN

ne of the most characteristic beliefs of Washington elites these days is that the true “meaning” of any particular event is always derived from large-scale “narratives” about headline topics like democracy, race, women’s rights, climate change, or criminal justice, which the particular case is supposed to illustrate. When the “narrative” contradicts the facts, it is the facts that are naturally expected to give way. What importance can a few stray facts possibly have next to the majesty and importance of a narrative that promises to end racism and war and save the planet?

To argue about whether yesterday’s hurricane was or was not an unusual weather event caused by burning carbon fuels in first-world countries is therefore to miss the point entirely: Facts don’t matter when confronted by the fierce urgency of a narrative beloved by the decent people who make policy in Washington. In this way, stories and parables that advance the priorities of policymaking elites become insulated from normal standards of proof. Instead, every piece of available evidence is selected to fit a predetermined pattern, which becomes reality in the minds of the narrative believers—who from the outside appear to behave suspiciously like members of a cult. What matters is that the narrative continue its progress through congressional committees that might appropriate funds that can be used to bribe local actors into shows of phony compliance that over time—who knows?—might even someday become real, too. Think of how true the narrative will be then!

In this way, even the most idiotic narrative, founded on the most absurd theories, can be gifted with a retrospective gloss of reality, as long as you don’t look hard at the facts. That is, until the entire house of cards collapses, as it did recently in Afghanistan.

Nowhere on the planet today is the gap between narrative and reality wider, and therefore under more constant pressure from elites in a wide range of countries, than in Lebanon, where the substitution of “narratives” for unpleasant realities may soon become the single largest component of the country’s GDP. Take the recent Lebanese elections, for example. The official results of the May 15 parliamentary elections had not yet been announced when English-language media reports declared the outcome to be a “major blow” to Hezbollah, the group that dominates that country.

Why? Because the fact-proof narrative, in which there is a “country” called Lebanon that is separate from the control of Hezbollah naturally requires that result—and for the result to mean something. The election, the storyline went, showed that gains by reformist civil society and independent candidates reflected popular Lebanese discontent with the traditional political class. These anti-Hezbollah forces handed a stinging defeat both to Hezbollah and to the established parties, whom the people held responsible for the financial collapse in 2019. And in so doing these new representatives of the people manifestly weakened the terror group by stripping it of the majority it had held in parliament, which—in the narrative, at least—is a real institution through which power is distributed and exercised.

It’s a nice story, to be sure. It even makes internal logical sense. Unfortunately, it’s not real. In reality, which can be an unpleasant place to live—just ask any Lebanese who is not busy lobbying the Americans, the Saudis, the French, or other outside powers for cash to delay the collapse of their fictional “reality” for another month or two—Lebanon is an Iranian-run satrapy which provides a forward operating base for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Tehran, which directs Hezbollah. That’s reality.

But it’s not just that all these words and categories like “parliament” and “elections” and “political parties” are meaningless in the Lebanese context—even on its own terms, the story is untrue. There was no such election result, either before or after the votes were counted—an action that in real-world terms was itself all but meaningless. What we’re dealing with here is messaging by Lebanese politicians and operatives in Beirut and Washington, D.C., which deliberately framed the supposed meaning of the outcome of this process for an international target audience that has invested in “the narrative” and might be persuaded to invest even more.

In quintessential Lebanese fashion, the purpose of messaging is to con the outside world, namely the United States and Saudi Arabia, into deepening their involvement and increasing their investment in Lebanon, on the basis of a narrative that allows everyone to avoid dealing with the local unpleasantness, which meanwhile only continues getting worse. The logic underlying this ploy is also characteristically Lebanese: If fate makes you bystanders of a tragedy in which you and your children and your neighbors are bound to be consumed, maybe you can alleviate your suffering for a moment or two by selling tickets to the play. The title of the play?
“The Aristocrats Say That Hezbollah is Doomed!”

Lebanon’s latest round of bizarre counterfactual Kabuki theater started well before the election. After Lebanon collapsed financially in late 2019, there were popular protests that briefly expressed anger at the political class, which is composed of figures that have been around since the Lebanese civil war of the 1970s. Civil society groups also mushroomed and put forward equally numerous platforms for how best to address the deadly rot that is consuming the country.

The protests would soon fizzle out. But Lebanese political players saw an opportunity to channel some of the discontent to their parochial advantage and against their sectarian rivals. Similarly, Lebanese analysts and activists in D.C. found in the protests and civil society activism fodder for their theories and policy analysis. Some Lebanese figures even made the rounds in D.C. to request funding for their NGOs. Hezbollah’s popular support has been shaken, they maintained, and the elections were a major opportunity to expose this weakness, and to deny the group the ability to hold sway over the country.

Of course, both Lebanese political players active in Washington—like the Lebanese Forces, the Maronite Christian party—and the Beirut-D.C. analyst crowd know that Hezbollah’s dominant military power is completely unaffected by folkloric performances like Lebanon’s parliamentary elections. As such, in order to sell their pitch about “weakening” Hezbollah, they resorted to a sleight of hand, inventing new yardsticks with which we could supposedly measure Hezbollah’s strength.

The scam, which the Lebanese political players and analysts could market in D.C. and try to sell to the Saudis—hey, you never know!—went something like this: The Lebanese didn’t have to take any direct action against Hezbollah itself. Rather, the true gauge of whether you’ve weakened Hezbollah is the electoral performance of its allies. More than anything else, supposedly the most meaningful indicator of Hezbollah’s actual strength was the performance of another Maronite Christian party, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM)—the party of the Lebanese president and his son-in-law and heir, former minister Gebran Bassil, which happens to be the Lebanese Forces’ old rival in parochial Maronite politics.

For months, Lebanese political operatives and Beirut-D.C. analysts confidently asserted that Bassil—who is sanctioned in 2020 for his role in official corruption—and the FPM were in free fall. Their day was over. Partisans of Lebanon’s sovereignty would soon have their chance to celebrate. A great victory would be won. Institutions would be strengthened. The money faucets could be turned on.

Why? Well, the argument went, the FPM’s impending colossal electoral defeat, which was all but guaranteed by the narrative, meant that Hezbollah would lose its “Christian cover”—a category without any actual meaning, and which the Lebanese operatives and analysts simply invented. Apparently, without “Christian cover,” Hezbollah wouldn’t be able to retain its vast arsenal—or something like that. And once Bassil loses his seat in parliament, Hezbollah wouldn’t be able to install him as the next president, after his father-in-law’s term ends in the fall. That, too, was sold as a catastrophic defeat for Hezbollah, because, we’re supposed to believe, the Lebanese presidency is a very powerful office, and without Bassil Hezbollah would be in a very tight jam indeed.

This kind of childish nonsense formed the core of the sustained messaging that set the stage for the tale that emerged after the election. Hence, the most salient talking point on election day, which was disseminated even before all the votes were counted, was the supposed defeat of Bassil and the FPM, who no longer could claim to be the largest representative of Lebanon’s Christians. A major blow had been struck against Hezbollah!

Only, not so much. In the final tally, while the FPM did lose some seats, it was nowhere near collapse, as the Beirut-D.C. chattering crowd had maintained. Rather, it ended basically in a tie with their Lebanese Forces rivals, who added a few seats. Bassil kept his seat as well. And when you factor in the seats won by the FPM’s ally, the pro-Iran Armenian Tashnag party, their coalition ends up with the larger Christian bloc. Add to that other Hezbollah-aligned Christians who won seats, and what happens to the Lebanese operatives’ mantra about Hezbollah’s “Christian cover,” whatever that meant to begin with? Hezbollah in fact had plenty of it. Which would matter, except for the fact that it’s all gibberish.

But what about those brave civil society candidates and independents, who provided evidence of the Lebanese people voting for change and of their rejection of Hezbollah and the traditional political class? While it’s true that a handful of pro-Assad fixtures have lost their seats to newcomers, that’s only the surface of the matter. The true story is far from the prevailing spin.

First, it should be noted that none of these new faces are Shia. In fact, for all the pre-election talk of Hezbollah’s supposed waning support among the Shia, the party and its Amal ally swept all 27 seats allotted to the sect in Lebanon’s confessional quota system. The new crop are all from the other sects, spread over the various electoral districts.

One breakthrough case in a south Lebanon district, which received a lot of airplay for its supposed importance as proof of the cracks in Hezbollah’s support base, involved a civil society candidate unseating the Syrian Social Nationalist Party representative for the Greek Orthodox seat. The incoming MP , Elias Jarade, has a family background with the Lebanese Communist party and its militia, which has a long history in south Lebanon, including in Jarade’s hometown. For instance, his brother had fought with the militia against Israel in the south. The Communist party reportedly mobilized to give Jarade enough votes to carry him through. Immediately after his win, Jarade went on Hezbollah TV and expressed his support for the Hezbollah line about the liberation of Lebanese occupied land, and echoed the group’s maximalist position on Lebanese maritime boundaries with Israel. A “major blow” to Hezbollah, indeed.

What results like this reveal is that the terms “civil society” or “independent”
are by no means synonymous with “anti-Hezbollah.” If anything, most of the MP’s under these categories have either a supportive or somewhat qualified position on Hezbollah’s “resistance,” to say nothing about the maritime dispute with Israel. Nor are the terms “civil society” and “independent” interchangeable, much as the post-election storyline and the various graphics produced to explain the makeup of the new parliament have conflated them. Many of the figures dubbed “independent” are simply members of the traditional political class, or figures backed by a member of that class. Similarly, the ability of some of the civil society candidates to win their seats actually was not the result of a popular vote for change against the traditional class. In some cases it was merely a result of interelite machination: maneuvers and deals between traditional leaders to secure their parochial interests.

Take for instance the civil society gains in the Shouf mountains that ousted two pro-Assad Druze figures. The Shouf and Aley districts are critical grounds for Druze chieftain Walid Jumblatt and for the continuity of his political household. The elder Jumblatt is in the middle of transferring the mantle of leadership to his son Taymour. Securing the family’s position against Druze rivals is of paramount importance for Jumblatt. By directing voters to bump the vote threshold of the two newcomers, who lack any serious popular constituency and are not far from Taymour Jumblatt’s circles, the Druze chieftain would allow them to benefit from an odd feature of this election’s convoluted sectarian law and break through at the expense of his Druze rivals in the mountain. Such a deal would have been done with the Shia parties, namely with the speaker of parliament and head of Amal, Nabih Berri. After the election, one of the ousted Druze rivals of Jumblatt spoke of “betrayal”—a reference to the Shia parties not directing enough votes to push him over the threshold. Berri is now set to return as speaker for the seventh consecutive term, which is another “major blow” to Hezbollah, no doubt.

Whatever Israel decides to do, its decision needs to be clear of any illusion about the nature of the problem it faces in Lebanon.”

The latter example is relevant to another salient talking point of the post-election narrative. Namely, that Hezbollah and its allies have lost the majority they held in parliament—the most tangible proof of their “weakening.” The obvious problem with this propaganda line is that in two previous back-to-back elections (2005 and 2009), Hezbollah and its allies had also failed to win the majority. The impact that had on the group’s ability to dominate the country, prosecute multiple conflicts across the region, vastly build up its arsenal, and expand its strategic depth in Syria, was precisely zero.

But even on its own terms, the whole argument about the parliamentary majority is silly. Hezbollah and its allies have the largest coalition, just shy of the 65-seat simple majority—which works just fine for the party.

On the other side there is, well, nothing. There is not even an opposing coalition. The “opposition” establishment parties (parties like the Lebanese Forces, the Phalanges, the remains of former Prime Minister Saad Hariri’s Future Movement, etc.) mistrust each other and all have their own individual ambitions and agendas, none more so than Samir Geagea, the leader of the Lebanese Forces, who harbors delusions of becoming the next president. The “independents” and the “civil society” crowd are just as fractured and incoherent. Jumblatt, meanwhile, has his own agenda, and he’ll cooperate with Berri and Hezbollah whenever it suits him.

Sooner or later, Hezbollah will likely be able to draw enough of those “independent” MPs. But even if not, it can call for a national unity government, which it will be able to guide in line with its priorities. Herding cats is what Hezbollah has done successfully for years. It’s just that some of the old cats have now been replaced with a new litter.

The bottom line here, it bears repeating, is that Lebanon’s political circus and the categories hawked by the Lebanese operatives are meaningless. Their only function is to sucker outsiders into believing they’re real and meaningful in order to sell tickets to Lebanon’s imagination land.

For its part, the United States, which is already deeply involved in Lebanon, is also playing a cynical game, similar to that of the Lebanese. When Hezbollah held the majority in parliament and ran the government, Washington was hardly dissuaded from dealing with and supporting that government. American policymakers simply invented a convenient fiction, distinguishing between “the Lebanese state” and Hezbollah, and using that phony distinction as a fig leaf. France, meanwhile, deals with Hezbollah directly, on the understanding that the group holds the keys to the place, where France has invested money and prestige.

Both France and the United States have spent the last two years exerting pressure on Saudi Arabia to reengage and renew sustained funding of Lebanon. Although the recently returned Saudi ambassador to Lebanon has been active, and has put some backing behind Geagea and others, there is no horizon here. A comment the other day by the Saudi foreign minister suggests that, the ambassador’s visibility notwithstanding, the Kingdom’s leadership is well aware of this reality and is keeping Lebanon at arm’s length. Riyadh’s limited engagement is best explained as alliance maintenance to keep the French happy without going overboard.

Israel, on the other hand, cannot
afford to treat any part of the Lebanon circus as though it were reality. Notwithstanding editorials and columns by Israeli pundits about the importance of the Lebanese election, or the signs of hope it might presage, Jerusalem is forced to face the fact that its interest in Lebanon is Hezbollah’s military arsenal and the threat it poses to Israel’s security. While American and French officials, not to mention D.C. think tankers, are sure to deafen Israeli officials with their tales about how the “smart” play to “weaken” or “constrain” Hezbollah is to “strengthen state institutions” and “play the long game” by supporting “political opposition groups and civil society,” Israel can’t lose sight of the fact that none of these things are real.

Israel’s problem in Lebanon, meanwhile, is entirely real—and it’s a military, not a political, problem. For most of the past decade, Israel has gone out of its way to avoid action in Lebanon. Instead, it has focused its energy on targeting Iranian and Hezbollah assets in Syria, and to prevent the establishment of an additional active front against it in the south of that country. For all its success and appeal—both in terms of actively downgrading enemy capabilities and extending the period of quiet with the northern front—the policy, known as “the war between wars,” has some dangerous flaws.

First, Hezbollah’s capabilities continue to grow in Lebanon, especially the local development of precision guidance capability for their missiles, which are said to be produced at the rate of a few a day and are now estimated to be in the hundreds. Second, this growth in military capability is playing against the strategic backdrop of U.S. policy with Iran. The Biden administration is pulling out all the stops to ink a deal with Iran in June. Once signed, the deal will remove sanctions on the terror-sponsoring state and finance its regional project and military assets.

Israel is putting out signals that it is weighing military options. For now, with Russia preoccupied with Ukraine, Israel is intensifying its strikes in Syria against Iranian and Hezbollah assets. But at some point, maybe sooner rather than later, it will face a moment of decision as to whether it will take action inside Lebanon. Whatever Israel decides to do, its decision needs to be clear of any illusion about the nature of the problem it faces in Lebanon—and of any self-delusion that entering the world of imaginary things so dear to American policymakers is a viable alternative for how to address the real and growing threats to Israel’s security.

Lebanon is a hall of mirrors. Activists, analysts, and U.S. government officials use words like “state institutions,” “elections,” “reform process,” and so on, but all they do is warp one’s brain. To remain grounded in reality, ignore the Aristocrats.

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possibilities for aesthetic development in the present. The figure of the contemporary artist we know today is an invention of the bureaucrats. He, like them, is a managerial type: polished, efficient, a very moderate, top-shelf drinker. His CV is always up to date. He worries about climate change. The likelihood he graduated from an Ivy League university is especially high; he may himself be a tenured professor (a near given for literary artists).

The nonmarket institutions of the art world, all vanguards of the progressive movement, have telegraphed that such a profile is compulsory for artists. They should be camera-ready and, if non-white, eager to discuss matters of identity. Like shrapnel, the words “justice,” “legacies,” “confront,” and “decenter” ideally will litter any personal statements on their work. To conform to these expectations is to be savvy, a prerequisite for success. Such is the figure of the institutionally backed artist. How any one individual chooses to pursue his career is not of particular interest to me. There will always be artists who are, and those who are not, corruptible, whether their patrons are the Medici, the CIA, or the Mellon Foundation. Bad art, wonderfully, is in the end forgotten. As tiresome, didactic, and predictable as much contemporary art may be, I ven-

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art. Far better, though, the institutions insist, to possess art intellectually, to understand works once and for all. Artists can be mentally checked off a list: “I understand her paintings; his installations; her sculptures. I have studied their relevance. Their message is clear to me.”

In answer to the question of how this mass debasing of art has come about, I can offer one preliminary explanation. The prevailing institutional orientation to art has seeped from the academy, like bog water, up and out into the public-facing art world. In college humanities departments, the main type of work carried out is best described as diagnostic. Students are taught to produce information about culture—including artworks—using analytic methods first propounded in the fields of gender and ethnic studies, and, most of all, cultural studies. Beginning in the 1980s, and certainly over the last 20 years, cultural studies critiques have become the dominant mode of inquiry in the humanities.

Cultural studies analysis thinks of art not in itself but as a sort of rash brought on by culture, or a spore that a culture puts out. Art—just as billboards, contraceptive marketing, and horticulture periodicals—is considered a symptom or emissary of the society from which it emerged. Solely on the basis of what it demonstrates about its time and place is art a subject of study. Naturally, an artwork’s aesthetics are irrelevant in the cultural studies mode of critique; no one work of art is any better, or more significant, than another. In its predominant lower forms, cultural studies is a kind of supremely unreigning social studies, practiced by people who believe all art is propaganda.

As a pedagogical model, cultural studies critique has become so prevalent in part because it makes students feel their work has real-world application. Departments, under pressure from their institution’s upper administration to salvage cratering student enrollment, sell the humanities degree as practical, skills-building, the basis for a fine career. Scholars themselves attend to a skills-building, the basis for a fine career. Individuals who have been trained to regard aesthetic experience with suspicion and seek from art a diagnosis of society.

Two exhibitions installed at major museums this year perfectly illustrate the institutions’ debased approach to art. 

Hogarth and Europe, on the Georgian era English painter and printmaker William Hogarth and his contemporaries, ran from November 2021 through this spring at London’s Tate Britain. According to its introductory wall text, greeting audiences as they enter, the exhibition “confronts the complexity and violence that were features of eighteenth-century culture. Works shown here often express a critical view of society, but they also reveal the entrenchment of racist, sexist, and xenophobic stereotypes.”

The number of new jobs for humanities professors started declining in the late 1970s; following the 2008 financial crisis, the job market collapsed. Rather than continue in academia on the tenure track, successive generations of humanities Ph.D.s instead have become K-12 teachers, editors, cultural critics, arts administrators, and nonprofit workers. Almost every employee in the cultural professions has a humanities bachelor’s degree, and many have postgraduate training. Obedient as nuns, all have been trained to regard aesthetic experience with suspicion and seek from art a diagnosis of society.

The ideals of liberty and politeness that many Europeans imagined characterized the era... were mainly produced by, and benefited, White men from the middle and upper classes. The concept of European superiority deepened, entrenching ideas about nation, personal identity and racial difference, manifested in the horrors of transatlantic slavery. Artists gave these supposed differences enduring visual form.

The exhibition wishes to establish, before all else, that artists (some? all?) of the mid-18th century were the stenographers and cartographers of their time. A painting is a pictorial facsimile of its period’s ruling ideology—rendered, somehow or other, in color, line, and shape. Of interest to us in these galleries is the artist as a recording device of history.

The curation of Hogarth and Europe was a team effort. Two in-house curators were joined by three external consultants, all scholars, along with 17 invited “commentators.” The latter group, which includes artists, were invited to write the short labels that accompany individual artworks, bringing to the exhibition “a wider range of perspectives, expertise, and insights.” Of the exhibition’s 20 guest experts, 10 hold positions at universities. The topics of their work include “the intersections of art, politics, and empire”; “issues relating to national identity”, “identity and the inter-relationship between
race, power and language”; “race and gender”; “visual representations of Black emotionality”; “the relationship between art and violence”; “revers[ing] the gaze”; “uncovering marginalised and silenced histories, figures, and cultural expressions”; “the visual culture of race and empire.”

Judging by their biographies, the experts broadly share a certain set of approaches when it comes to art. What kinds of “insights” do they offer about the paintings and prints on display?

When beholding A Midnight Modern Conversation, Hogarth’s bawdy engraving, “we are clearly meant to find the men’s woozy misbehaviour funny. However, we might also consider that the punch they drink and the tobacco they smoke are material links to a wider world of commerce, exploitation, and slavery.” Harder to laugh at the image now, is it not? A similar point is delivered more bluntly elsewhere: In the second painting from Hogarth’s satirical sequence Marriage A-la-Mode, “however indirectly ... the atrocities of Atlantic investments are invoked in relation to the outsized expenditures on Asian luxury goods.” The work is, “overall, a picture of White degeneracy.”

Audiences are encouraged to “look out for” characters in the margins. The labels to many multicharacter compositions focus exclusively on minor figures, who apparently are the key to understanding the works. The two texts accompanying Hogarth’s sardonically painted Taste in High Life, a send-up of the indulgence and pretensions of the upper classes, discuss solely its racial elements. About the young enslaved servant, “These children were dehumanised and treated like pets”; in the caricatured white shoppers, “it is as if Hogarth’s worst fears are being realised, with the figures corseted into the objects of their enslavement.” On John Greenwood’s Sea Captains Carousing in Surinam—depicting a large group of drunken men partying to excess—both commentators write exclusively about the enslaved figures: “The imagined Black presence in Surinam’s contemporaneous life is laid bare, alongside the free abandon of Whiteness as power.” The way an enslaved man is rendered holding a bowl “suggests that his body is no more than an inanimate thing, a mere means to a debauched end.”

In Hogarth’s painting Southwark Fair, a chaotic and exuberant crowd scene, the curators choose to bring our attention to the “racist juxtaposition” of the dog and the Black boy trumpeter, which “signal[s] deepening ideas of racial difference pervasive in eighteenth-century culture.” An irrelevant painting by Dutch artist Cornelis Troost, in which a man flanked by trumpeters in blackface at an upstairs window moons a crowd below, is a meeting of “black-face and white-bottom ... or Racism and White supremacy, challenging the audience within and without the painting.” These comments barely pretend to educate viewers about the art. On the contrary, they instruct viewers on what to think.

Representation is all: Images rely on “antisemitic visual conventions,” or play into “stereotyped representations of people with dwarfism,” or associate “female sexuality and sex work with moral decline.” Hogarth takes “a conservative view of class mobility and change.”

What different meanings might the audience derive from Marriage A-la-Mode’s fourth painting, a reception scene featuring 11 characters? The label text is an imagined monologue by the Black servant: “The Countess treats me with disdain almost all of the time, but she loves the way I can be a delightful African Gentleman when she needs me to take that role. To her I am simply a Black body rippling with exotic otherness.” Presumably you understand the painting now.

In a self-portrait of the artist at work, the chair in which Hogarth sits “literally supports him and exemplifies his view on beauty. The chair is made from timbers shipped from the colonies, via routes which also shipped enslaved people. Could the chair also stand in for all those unnamed Black and Brown people enabling the society that supports his vigorous creativity?”

In posing her assertion as a question, the author of this label—herself an artist—feigns being diplomatic. Really, she is being slippery. Do you think her question has more than one correct answer?

Fictions of Emancipation: Carpeaux Recast was mounted at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City this March and is set to run for a year. It centers around a single sculpture within the museum’s permanent collection, an object the Met’s members will be familiar with: Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux’s Why Born Enslaved! A life-size marble bust of a bound, seminude enslaved woman, modeled in 1868, is one of the most well-known works of 19th-century abolitionist art. Joining in-house Met curator was a guest curator, a poet and essayist who directs the nonfiction writing program at Columbia University and was formerly a dean at Parsons School of Design. The Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Foundation, a major donor to medical research and the arts, is a sponsor of the show, and the Ford Foundation helped fund the catalog.

Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, ‘Why Born Enslaved!,’ modeled 1868, carved 1873The Metropolitan Museum of Art Much about the exhibition is indicated, accurately, by the words fictions and recast in its title. The curators have set out to demonstrate that all who have recognized Carpeaux’s famous sculpture as politically progressive for its time have been wrong. From the marketing and exhibition materials:

While the subject’s resisting pose, defiant expression, and accompanying inscription have long been interpreted as conveying a powerful antislavery message, the bust also visualizes longstanding European fantasies about the possession of and domination over Black people’s bodies.

Carpeaux—whether he knew it or not, despite his public support for emancipation—through his artwork gave expression to such racist “fantasies.” Abolitionist admirers of the sculpture in Carpeaux’s own time committed a similar sin: According to a wall text, “the replication and sale of Why Born Enslaved! in miniature echoes the commodification of people of African descent that took place under slavery.” The longstanding status of Carpeaux’s sculpture has been
a fiction. Finally its true meaning is being revealed.

Throughout the exhibition, audiences are informed that “underlying” Carpeaux’s sculpture are “the hierarchies of race”, that it embodies “colonialist influences” and “belongs to the tradition of artworks that enslave Black personhood with depictions of captivity.” Various other 18th- and 19th-century artworks are showcased as examples of this tradition. Given the show’s explicit aim of recasting Why Born Enslaved!, the preponderance of wall texts and explanatory labels is unsurprising. Indeed, the exhibition texts are ultimately more important here than the artworks, which feel less like the show’s substance and more like evidence brought in to support the curators’ statements.

Given how they are framed, responding personally to these works is especially difficult. The curators are intent on foreclosing any alternate meanings the art might have for audiences. For me, Bartholdi’s bronze figure Allegory of Africa is an arresting piece of figurative sculpture. It is too striking for me to depend on its title for meaning. Turning to the object’s label, then, how am I meant to square my aesthetic impression with the object’s label, then, how am I meant to support the curators’ statements.

Other descriptions may catch one off guard. On display is an attractive sculpture. It is too striking for me to defer to the Met. May 20–26, 2022 • 20–26 Iyyar, 5782

For herself, if she wishes to have aesthetic experiences, the individual art lover must come to recognize and reject the institutions’ utilitarian framing of art. The diagnostic approach of experts is baked in to new exhibitions, as it is in humanities departments, the arts media, and philanthropic foundations. Categorically ignoring any but the most basic museum labels is the first thing an art lover can do.

Beyond that, she is on her own. But she always was. The great debasement of art reminds those of us who have cultivated in ourselves the ability to have powerful aesthetic experiences that real art encounters always are private and unfolding, never imported; that we are not social beings only; that artworks engage the mind in the broadest sense, as well as the body and spirit. So long as experts remain ignorant about the terms of the art encounter, we are best off disregarding them.

This article was originally published on May 26, 2022.
THE REST

→ Tuesday was a brutal night for Trump-backed candidates in Georgia, and a mixed bag for candidates with Trump endorsements across three other states holding primary elections. The latest election results have added more volatility to the GOP as establishment Republicans won several key races and elevated their status as a potentially viable alternative to Trump-aligned candidates for voters in November. Trump’s aggressive attacks on Gov. Brian Kemp did little in the Georgia Republican primary to sway voters, who gave a 50-point edge to Kemp over David Perdue, the senator whom Trump supported with $2 million in campaign contributions. Georgians also gave the nod to four other candidates opposing those backed by Trump, though the former president found some success in Arkansas, where his former White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders sailed to victory in the gubernatorial primary.

→ On Sunday, French law enforcement arrested a 51-year-old man for killing his neighbor, René Hadjaj, a 90-year-old Jewish man, by pushing him out of the window of his 17th-floor apartment. Police investigating the murder say that the neighbor, a Muslim man, did not target his neighbor because he was Jewish, a claim that has rankled the Jewish community in Lyon where Hadjaj lived. The suspect’s attorney says that his client had been using marijuana and subsequently fell into a state of temporary insanity when the crime was committed, a claim of cannabis delirium that was similarly used in a successful defense in 2017, by lawyers representing a man who shouted antisemitic slurs when he pushed Sarah Halimi, a Jewish retiree, to her death from her apartment balcony.

→ The Disinformation Governance Board, a Department of Homeland Security panel created to expand the government’s regulatory power over social media platforms and public speech, has been “paused” following weeks of mockery and criticism. The board was to be led by the controversial disinformation expert Nina Jankowicz, who had earlier helped perpetuate the false claim that reporting based on Hunter Biden’s laptop was Russian disinformation. Jankowicz and the board had faced harsh criticism from both conservatives and civil libertarian groups including the American Civil Liberties Union.

→ The United States will face a summer of blackouts, as unprecedented heat, power shortages, and supply issues strain our already-weak energy infrastructure. In the Northern Hemisphere, temperatures are expected to break records, which will push up consumer demand just as energy companies struggle with supply issues caused by the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and a tight market for fuel. The unprecedented heat has also exacerbated drought conditions; according to NASA, much of the American West is currently suffering from the worst mega-drought in 1,200 years, which has dropped water levels to historic lows.

→ Fundraising in the wake of George Floyd’s murder in 2020, the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation raised $90 million in donations—it then squandered much of that money (and much of that good will) on millions of dollars in real estate and private air travel and on paying a member of the founder’s family just under $2 million for consulting services. These revelations, which appear in filings submitted by the organization, come in the wake of previous reports that the organization purchased a lavish $6 million Beverly Hills mansion, which led supporters and critics alike to call for more transparency.

FROM THE BACK PAGES

In the midst of a critical manpower shortage in the military, rising costs due to inflation are placing added stress on retention and recruiting efforts and threaten to become a national security problem. According to the Department of Defense (DoD), more than 400,000 service members move annually, a number that doesn’t include spouses and children. This summer, the season when most moves occur, a lot of military families will be in limbo. Some already are.

First, there’s the issue of packing up and leaving. Last summer, the labor shortage meant military families faced difficulties finding crews to pack, load, and move their belongings to their new duty station. This summer, the DoD’s Transportation Command (TRANSCOM) has put certain mitigation measures in place to try to space out demand for moving crews. However, there’s not much else they can do beyond expectation management.

“[Year] 2022 transit times have been adjusted to take into consideration global labor, supply chain congestion, and pandemic challenges in order to give customers a more accurate expectation of when to expect their belongings,” said a TRANSCOM spokesman over email. “Several families have had their movers cancel and have been told to move themselves,” a military spouse in Alabama told The Scroll.

— Maggie Phillips
Not Unpacking My Library

BY JAKE MARMER

Boxes of books are a reminder of a lifelong, sometimes turbulent love for the written word

I am not unpacking my library. No, I’m not. I pace around the living room of our newly rented apartment, which isn’t even so new anymore, but it still doesn’t feel like home. In Russian, we say: “Why are you standing there like an impoverished relative?” In Yiddish it’s something about standing around like a golem. I say both of those admonitions to myself, almost out loud, but all of our new things here—couch, bookcases, built-in shelves, fake fireplace—continue to feel foreign to me, and even our old things, the very few we could bring here with us, feel out of context. My doumbek drum functions as a miniature coffee table with a tall stack of magazines and books, and a cup of coffee tilting ominously.

I have moved a lot in my life, too much, and in the chaos that every move entails, in the churning and trashing of possessions, in the reckoning with everything unfinished and forgotten that inevitably rises to the surface, it is the unpacking of books that always served as a kind of a ritual act, an alignment of physical and mental: I’d look at them and feel that I finally landed, that I’m back in the familiar. Even in my parents’ home across the ocean, where I visit a few times a decade—a home where I did not grow up but where they moved shortly after I immigrated in my teens, a home that provokes an oddly sidewise-pointing nostalgia—I feel more grounded as I look at the familiar shelves, the books I grew up reading.

This time around, though, our books are not making me feel content or at home, and that’s why there are still 15 or so hefty boxes stacked atop of each other. There are the Russian books I’ve brought during overseas visits throughout the years, which I never put out on the shelves because out of the four members of my immediate family, I’m the only one who can read these books, and it seems wrong to take up space like that—it’s like sprawling my least comprehensible self across all over the house. In the same box, among other things, there are innumerable volumes of Turgenev from my grandmother’s home, my only physical possession I inherited from her, aside from the pink-gold wedding band, which she gave me the very last time we saw each other, and which I now wear on my pinky when it isn’t too hot outside and it can fit without cutting off my circulation. She had very thin fingers. There is a two-volume memoir of Viktor Shklovsky, which I’ve been wanting to reread since before our move, because this year I am obsessed, as he was, with skaz, a kind of oral storytelling with a book’s binding for a tongue. But Shklovsky is deep inside a heavy box, and I have not opened it in years, since before our second child was born.

A few of the boxes are filled with Torah commentary and essays on Judaism by Abraham Joshua Heschel, Jonathan Sacks, and others. It’s not that they feel dated or irrelevant to me. I know they’re timeless, but I’m not timeless, and I’ve gotten what I wanted from them, and have no interest in seeing them again, not even as book spines. If anything, they just remind me that for two decades, I’ve secretly wanted to go to rabbinical school, and now is the time to pay, or not pay, for my kids’ schooling, not mine.

For the past seven years we lived in a graduate housing unit on a university campus. The university demanded we get rid of all of our furniture and use their minimal setup instead. Shedding our possessions felt like an eerie purification act. Aside from kids’ drawings, our library was our only house décor in those days, our most visible possession, and it continued to grow with the years. My partner is a literary scholar who also runs a book review section; I am a poet who teaches and often writes about books. People send us books like mad: I ask for one, they send three. Sometimes a publisher sends a half-dozen titles at a time, and the decision of what to do with each one gets postponed as the stacks continue to grow. The fact that each of these books is its own advertising, asking to be reviewed not read, that it is both a work of art and an act of self-promotion, feels—it feels a lot like everything else in my life. We’re not connoisseurs or collectors: Our love has been tested by motives of acquisition. We’re bookworms but we’re worn out. The obsession with owning books is its own kind of materialism that is no longer nourishing to me.
Besides, in the recent few years, most of the books I’ve read (or “read”) were actually on audio, or on screen of my device. And so, the disparity between what I’ve actually read or want to read and what is sitting on my shelves has only grown wider. Plus, having experienced a massive university library, where anything is available, anything at all—the desire for ownership suddenly feels crass. “I’ve read it, so should own it”—is that a reason for owning anything? There are books here that my partner read, and I should have read by now, but wasted my time instead. They stare at me accusingly. There are books I was once inspired by and feel ashamed facing my younger self inside the pages—the embarrassment about the fire that burned in me when I read these books, the hopes I held as a reader and writer, the fire that at that point, is nothing but a self-reference.

In truth, though, it isn’t a literary jadedness that’s at the heart of all this: It’s our lower-middle-class-living-far-above-ours means train wreck of a life. We’re into our middle age, and still renting, still barely making the bills, owning nothing, with nothing anchoring us but these piles of books. Sometimes, looking at them, I feel I am looking at a mistake, my own life’s choice that will not offer security but only weight and bulk, and an obligation to be shlepped along wherever I go. One day, instead of passing on a home, or a savings account, I will pass on these books, which my children will donate, somewhere, unwanted.

So why hold on to them? Why unpack anything at all and not just donate the whole lot?

For one, there are more than a few books here written by people I’ve known, poets who are no longer with us, and their names, and inscriptions make me feel things. Here is the stodgy, dignified line from poet Samuel Menashe—“to Jacob, from strength to strength.” A crooked alef with a mysterious wish from Beat legend David Meltzer. More stab than a signature inside a book by a poet I met in Israel, whose home and hospitality I enjoyed one Shabbat in the mystical city of Tzfat. He was a tortured soul whose life took a severe downturn after a tumultuous divorce, and he died much too young, much too alone. I have a half-dozen books by poet and jazz aficionado Steve Dalachinsky—which he never signed for me—why didn’t I ever think to ask? I just couldn’t imagine he’d ever be gone.

Yet, somehow, books written by those friends who are alive irritate me. I’m glad they’re alive! Till 120! But do they need to be so prolific? Don’t they have troubles, depression, children, distractions, work? Why do some of my prolific poet friends insist on publishing so much of what they write, and send me every single book of theirs? I love to imagine their voice as I read them, but the pleasure is muffled by my own petty grumbles cutting through: While they’re publishing and writing, how is my catalog going? Once, I went out to have a drink with a poet, who brought along, to our first meeting, his whole oeuvre for me to take home. Did he expect me to take off a few months to study him thoroughly, or was this just a “read every autumn, spread over next decade” sort of a thing? Our first meeting ended up being our last, and I don’t think any of his books are in these boxes.

There is, of course, the “I might need it someday” factor, which is not entirely a delusion: I teach, I put together syllabi and source sheets, and to hang around the bookshelf for ideas is a pleasant way to put together a course. It’s certainly nicer to sit with a book, preparing for a class than to do that on a laptop. In the age of Zoom, to flash that same physical book in front of the screen, sift through its pages, take out the handwritten notes feels far better than reading text from the screen while also facing an audience through that same screen. I know it’s more convenient, of course, but that’s why I take the books out—ritual has many uses, and convenience is not one of them.

I love best the books I’ve used for teaching, repeatedly and over the years. Walter Benjamin’s Illuminations is the most worn out, note-ridden, and “well-loved” book I own. I may not ever teach or read Lion Feuchtwanger’s Jew Suss again but I remember the day I finished reading at a mistake, my own life’s choice that will not offer security but only something more exciting.

The electric music of Sons of Kemet made Skinner a good candidate for The Smile, in which he joins Yorke and Greenwood to make some absolutely electric rock music. If you’re looking at The Smile through the lens of Radiohead albums, it feels like a mix of early alt-rock albums like The Bends, the anger of Hail to the Thief, and the melancholy electronica of Moon-Shaped Pool. The Smile might have been a temporary COVID project, but it marks an exciting point in the ever-evolving careers of everyone involved.

A Light for Attracting Attention is a complex, moody work filled with moments of pure catharsis. Would a Radiohead album by any other name sound any different? Thankfully, the answer is no.

—David Meir Grossman

**Album of the Week**

**The Smile, A Light for Attracting Attention**

The Smile, a three-piece band, features two of the most well-known musicians on the planet in Thom Yorke and Jonny Greenwood. Their legacies in Radiohead and film scores are secure, to say the least. But what about this third guy, Tom Skinner?

Skinner is part of a tremendously exciting London jazz scene, which includes his work in Sons of Kemet, a band fronted by Shabaka Hutchings that focuses on breaking through stale and archaic views of British identity and replacing them with something more exciting.

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reading it, alone in my bachelor apartment, late in the night, laying on the floor for some reason, and when, closing the book, I sat up, in the darkened room, and cried the kind of a cry that made me want to teach literature to begin with. Even if my notes inside these books make me cringe, the fact, and the Talmudic density, of their existence, reminds me of the pleasure of reading. It’s a symbol of the romance with bookishness I’ve nursed for years—even when I am angry and disappointed at what it brought me.

Now, preparing to teach, I’m busy figuring out where to situate my desk—in relation to the books, of course. I can’t just not have any books behind me. Must have those shelves: A crass background like china or a marital bed, or an all-too-existential blur, or the blank nothingness of an empty wall feels not only boring but utterly inauthentic. With a background like that, the face I project over Zoom just would not be my real, deeply true self.

Seriously: Is there another way for me to construct an outward-facing identity? As Walter Benjamin admitted, pacing around his own still-incomplete library, “what else is this collection but a disorder to which habit accommodated itself to such an extent that it can appear as order?” The sacred Jewish books; the obligatory shelf of dissertation work and literary theory; a bursting bookshelf of poetry. To let go is to let go of the self that took so many years to cultivate as a kind of acceptable order. To let go is to pack that self in the box, in preparation for the final packing. But to continue unpacking is to remember, with each next book, the disorder that underlies my life’s trajectory, a chaos that gradually swallows me. So I continue to pace and dodge stacks of boxes. You might say, it’s not that I haven’t fully unpacked—but that I’m already halfway packed out. Weeks keep going by, and out of this in-between, paralyzed moment, the real stared back at me. ■

This article was originally published on May 25, 2022.

Tel Aviv on the Thames

BY LEAH KOENIG

Israeli and Middle Eastern restaurants change what’s on the menu in London

Inside the restaurant, a parade of dishes makes its way to my table. There’s griddled halloumi sitting in a pool of fragrant nigella seed honey. There is fried eggplant drizzled with fiery z’chug and date syrup. Next comes a plate of creamy hummus, its surface shimmering with browned butter, and a plate of chewy laffa for dipping. Between bites, I sip a sparkling water, and elegantly fashionable fine dining spots like The Palomar, where the pillow kubaneh has become local culinary canon. There’s the pita stand Shuk in London’s beloved Borough Market (where the silky eggplant sabich and hazelnut-chocolate babka are as good as anything you can find in Tel Aviv), and a Middle Eastern-inspired steakhouse, The Black Cow, that serves its charcoal-grilled steaks alongside harissa-slabbered fries and grilled corn with briny feta.

London is hardly the only city to catch a fever for the bold flavors of the Mediterranean. In New York City, where I live, there are a bevvy of modern Israeli and Middle Eastern-inspired eateries to choose from. And the same could be said for cities from Los Angeles to Berlin. But there is something extra going on in London. Theirs is a next-level infatuation that transcends trendiness. In London, modern Israeli food has become an inextricable part of the dining landscape.

Yotam Ottolenghi has something to do with it—quite a lot, actually. The Israeli-born chef and his business partner, the Palestinian chef Sami Tamimi, opened their first restaurant, Ottolenghi, in 2002 in London’s Notting Hill neighborhood. It did not take long for the city’s diners to fall for their fresh and inventive briny feta.
approach to cooking, or their generous hand with rose water, pomegranate molasses, labneh, za’atar, and other gifts from the Middle Eastern pantry.

Today, Ottolenghi is the establishment—not in a stuffy or exclusive way, but in terms of cultural ubiquity and influence. In addition to his many restaurants (which remain bustling 20 years on, and despite the blows of the pandemic), and his team’s many cookbooks, he is a weekly recipe columnist for The Guardian. And the spices and other ingredients he and Tamimi introduced are now commonly found in Waitrose and other London supermarkets. “He is the father of modern Israeli cuisine in London,” said Victoria Prever, food editor for The Jewish Chronicle. “He blazed the trail.”

As Ottolenghi’s star continued its meteoric rise, its light began to radiate outward to other chefs, including alumni of his company. In 2004, the husband-and-wife chefs Itamar Srulovich and Sarit Packer relocated to London from Israel. They were eager to move on from their home country’s food scene, which, at the time, was still rather limited. Before long, they began working at Ottolenghi.

“Working there was a revelation,” Srulovich told me. “We left Israel to cook the cuisines of the world, but we saw there how much people cherished the food we had grown up eating. It had resonance for them just like any other cuisine.”

Srulovich described the working environment at Ottolenghi as “embryonic”—a supportive place that encouraged chefs to contribute and grow. “Working with Yotam was a joy, and just by being near Sami you become a better person,” he said. In 2012, Srulovich and Packer branched out on their own, opening Honey & Co.—a petite spot with a sunny vibe and a vibrant Middle Eastern-inspired menu to match. Of everything I ate on a recent trip to London, Hon ey & Co.’s poached quince served over creamy curd cheese and showered with spiced honey and hazelnuts was the most memorable.

Srulovich and Packer have since opened two other establishments: the Middle Eastern deli and provisions shop Honey & Smoke and the grill house Honey & Spice, which serves dishes like charred tuna skewers with preserved lemon and coriander chermoula, and grilled lamb with bab a ghanouj and grilled bread. After 10 years, the original Honey & Co. location will close in May. But while saying goodbye to their first restaurant baby is bittersweet, Srulovich said he and Packer see the closing as a chance to pause and refocus before reopening at a new site in a new neighborhood in June.

While Ottolenghi’s influence on London’s dining scene cannot be overstated, it is not the only factor. The U.K. is home to 25,000 Israelis, a number that is both at an all-time high, and growing at a rapid clip. In a city hardly known for its abundance of sunshine, having access to such a sunny cuisine in London can serve as a balm for homesick Israelis.

Meanwhile, the ties between Britain’s Jewish population and Israel are both geographically and emotionally close. Marc Summers, who founded Bubala in partnership with chef Helen Graham, is an Ashkenazi Londoner through and through. His grandfather grew up around the corner from where the restaurant now sits, and Summers was raised eating cholent, chopped liver, and other European Jewish staples. But every year, Summers’ family spent their annual holidays in Tel Aviv and Eilat. “That was when I first truly started to appreciate Middle Eastern food,” Summers said. Today, a chef-y riff of his family’s potato latkes is included on the menu at Bubala. But nearly everything else on the vegetable-forward menu skews breezy and Mediterranean.

Diners across the spectrum are, quite literally, eating it up. Modern Israeli and Middle Eastern restaurants routinely top the city’s “best of lists,” with new spots—like the upscale restaurant Jeru salem Ponda and a chef-y riff of his family’s potato latkes is included on the menu at Bubala. But nearly everything else on the vegetable-forward menu skews breezy and Mediterranean.

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“London has a barometer for what is cool, but also enduring,” said Layo Paskin, who founded The Palomar in 2014 with his sister Zoe. (They also own the North African-inspired restaurant The Barbary, and several other well-loved London eateries.) “There are certain foods where you have them once and don’t crave them again for six months. This is food you want to eat every week.”

Like all big cities, London is a cultural crossroads with a globally influenced dining scene to match. But as Paskin said, Middle Eastern cuisine has “become part of the city’s culinary horizon.” Other flashy cuisines may come and go. But the silky, smoky appeal of charred eggplants and the mouth-puckering delights of preserved lemons are here to stay.
Scrambled Eggs with Hot and Sweet Peppers and Harissa

BY PAOLA GAVIN

INGREDIENTS

1 or 2 pointed sweet red peppers, about 8 ounces
4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
1 or 2 garlic cloves, crushed
1 or 2 hot red chili peppers
1 tablespoon concentrated tomato paste, dissolved in 3 tablespoons water
1 tablespoon harissa, or taste
1 teaspoon paprika
½ teaspoon ground caraway seeds
4 eggs, beaten

PREPARATION

Step 1
Wash the sweet peppers and remove the core and seeds. Cut into 1/2 inch squares.

Step 2
Heat the olive oil in a heavy-bottomed saucepan and add the sweet peppers. Cover and cook over a gentle heat for 8 to 10 minutes or until they start to soften. Add the garlic and chili peppers and cook for 1 minute without browning. Add the tomato paste, harissa and spices, then pour in 1/2 cup water. Bring to a boil.

Step 3
Cover and simmer for 10 to 15 minutes or until the peppers are tender and the sauce is reduced. Add the beaten eggs and season with salt. Continue to cook, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon, until the eggs have a creamy consistency. Serve at once.

Yield: 2–4 servings